



FIELD-MARSHAL SIR CLAUDE AUCHINLECK

G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E., LL.D.

# AUCHINLECK

A Biography of  
Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck

G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E., LL.D.

BY  
JOHN CONNELL



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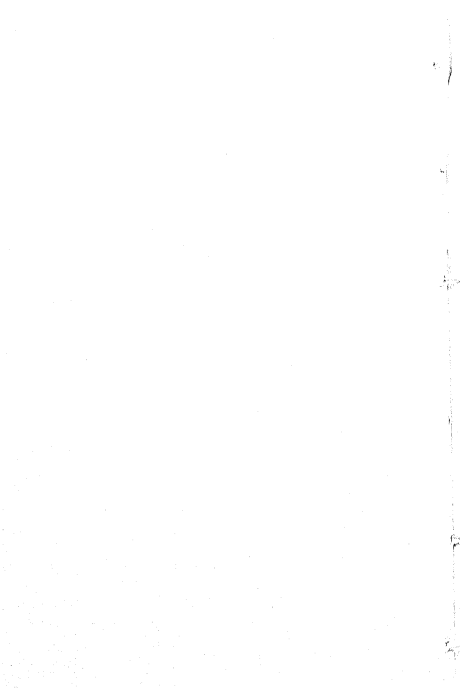
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Set in 10-on-11 point Baskerville type and  
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Cox & Wyman Ltd., London, Reading and Fakenham

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Dedicated to  
the memory of  
The Indian Army  
1759-1947



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THERE can be no doubt about it: James Boswell is always the biographer's best example and greatest help. He said of his method of writing *The Life of Samuel Johnson*: 'Instead of melting down my materials into one mass, and constantly speaking in my own person, by which I might appear to have more merit in the execution of the work, I have resolved to adopt and enlarge upon the excellent plan of Mr. Mason, in his *Memoirs of Gray*. Wherever narrative is necessary to explain, connect, and supply, I furnish it to the best of my abilities; but in the chronological series of Johnson's life, which I trace as distinctly as I can, year by year, I produce, wherever it is in my power, his own minutes, letters, or conversation, being convinced that this mode is more lively, and will make my readers better acquainted with him, than even most of those were who actually knew him, but could only know him partially; whereas there is here an accumulation of intelligence from various points, by which his character is more fully understood and illustrated.'

This has been the method which I have tried to pursue, not speaking in my own person, but seeking, by the use of his minutes, letters and conversation, and the letters and minutes of others, to make my readers better acquainted with the character and the achievements of Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck than most of those were who actually knew him, but could only know him partially.

I am not afraid to let this book be assessed by the standard which I have invoked. But of course there are differences. Auchinleck was a soldier; Johnson was a writer, who made some extremely sensible observations about soldiering. When Boswell first published his biography, his illustrious friend had been dead seven years. Auchinleck, when the last words of this book were written in August 1959, was salmon fishing in Norway. Johnson consigned his letters and private papers to the fire. Auchinleck, when he left India in 1947, put all his documents away and did not look at them for ten years.

However, like Boswell with his illustrious friend, I have had the benefit—and the joy—of many conversations with Auchinleck. I have not attempted to reproduce them in print; but the book, I hope, is steeped in the sense of them. It may be said: why write, in such detail, the biography of a man still happily living? I call to

my aid an even more powerful supporter than Boswell—Samuel Johnson himself. 'If a life be delayed,' he said, 'till interest and envy are at an end, we may hope for impartiality, but must expect little intelligence.'

This is a critical but not an impartial biography. Both interest and envy have had their say—in full—about Claude Auchinleck in the years that have passed since his active career was brought to an end. I believed that it was time for another voice to be heard. But a biographer must be both advocate and judge. He must therefore be prepared to state, and if necessary to defend, the standards by which he assesses the conduct, character and achievement of his subject. Mine are those which Field-Marshal Lord Wavell laid down, in his essay on Belisarius,<sup>1</sup> 'for inclusion in the Sixth Form of generalship':

I said I would consider only one who had handled large forces in an independent command in more than one campaign; and who had shown his qualities in adversity as well as in success. I then proposed to judge him by his worth as a strategist; his skill as a tactician; his power to deal tactfully with his Government and his allies; his ability to train troops or direct their training; and his energy and driving power in planning and in battle.

Was Auchinleck a Sixth Former? This I set out to discover; and in coming to my conclusions about his merits and his deficiencies, I found myself inevitably delivering judgments upon others. Truth is apt to be a stern task-mistress; once she has a man in thrall she will not let him go. If I have felt her lash and her goad, I have also learned a great deal. Infallibility I certainly do not claim: integrity and seriousness of purpose are the rocks upon which I stand.

Some years ago I ventured to declare<sup>2</sup>: 'The writer of contemporary history is subject to a duality of outlook. He is conscious of a real degree of involvement in that which he studies, about which he writes; and he has to strive—never entirely successfully—to rise above that knowledge of involvement. He has shared in, he has been moulded by, a massively formative experience, with all its passion and all its pain, all the glories of its aspirations, all the sordid shortcomings of its achievements. If he is to communicate his awareness of the meaning of that experience, he must relive it, but purely and as an act of the creative will. On his own plane he must be as

<sup>1</sup> *Soldiers and Soldiering* by A. P. Wavell, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> In a lecture to the Royal Society of Literature on 'Contemporary History', reprinted in *Essays by Divers Hands*, The Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature, New Series, Vol. XXIX.

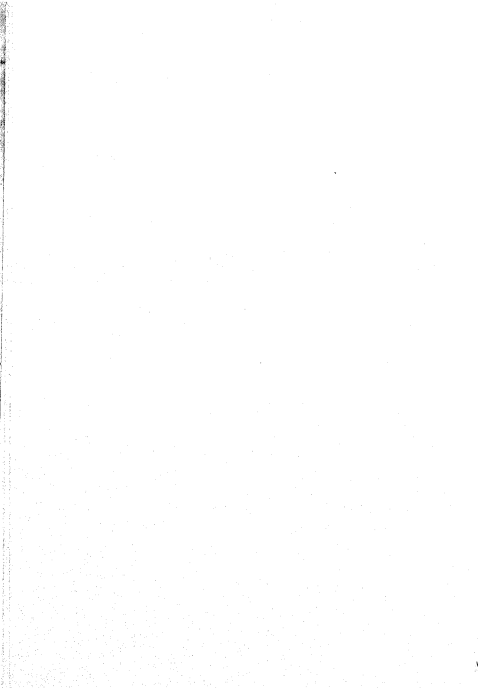
## AUTHOR'S NOTE

dedicated to the effort to communicate the truth of which he has knowledge as is the painter or the poet.'

I have my own knowledge and experience, as a junior officer, of many of the events which I have here sought to describe. That of which I have written has been, in large measure, within my own immediate apprehension. I have written of cities and lands that I have known and loved, of a war I fought in, of men I knew and served under or alongside, of controversies in which I took part, of glories and squalors, of victories, defeats and bitter humiliations which are the muscle and fibre of my own experience.

This is what it is to write contemporary history. In an epoch such as ours, a writer who has lived such a life as mine is bound to seek in contemporary history his greatest test. As he writes he must strive to attain a poet's precision, 'a union', in Professor H. T. Wade-Gery's lapidary phrase, 'of passion and candour'.

That has been my aim throughout this biography of Field-Marshal Auchinleck. And, to plagiarize once again a writer whose ancestors acquired the lands from which Auchinleck's ancestors had been disinherited: 'having said thus much by way of introduction, I commit the following pages to the candour of the Publick.'



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My debt to Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck is incalculable. No formal expression, however sincere, can do justice to my awareness, or discharge a tenth of it. Nevertheless it is, I hope, manifest on every page of this book.

In addition my thanks go in full measure to: Mrs. Cerise Jackson, Mrs. R. Chenevix Baldwin and Sir Hugh Beaver for information, photographs, advice and assistance on all family matters;

For advice, assistance and permission to publish hitherto unpublished documents (letters, signals, diaries and reports) to:

Sir Winston Churchill, Earl Attlee, Shri Jawaharlal Nehru; Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cork and Orrery, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cunningham of Hyndhope, Admiral of the Fleet the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, Field-Marshal Lord Ironside; the Countess Wavell, Lady Dill; Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder; the Marquess of Linlithgow, Mr. Julian Amery; Lord Winterton; Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, Sir Alexander Roger, Sir Olaf Caroe, Sir Evan Jenkins, Sir Arthur Lothian; General the Lord Ismay, General Sir Richard O'Connor, General Sir Edwin Morris, General Sir Frank Messervy, General Sir Rob Lockhart, General Sir Geoffrey Scoones, General Sir Neil Ritchie; Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander Galloway, Lieutenant-General Sir John Swayne, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Smith, Lieutenant-General Sir Ian Jacob, Lieutenant-General T. W. Corbett; Major-General T. W. Rees, Major-General Eric Dorman O'Gowan, Major-General S. Shahid Hamid; Major-General Sir Treffry Thompson, Brigadier-General W. D. Villiers-Stuart, Brigadier E. J. Shearer, Brigadier Desmond Young; Colonel Hugh Muller; Colonel Majeed Malik, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Ridgway, Lieutenant-Colonel Angus Mackinnon, Lieutenant-Colonel F. M. Bailey; Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Hamilton, Major M. I. Qureshi, Major R. Learmonth, Major A. A. Greenwood; Mr. Philip Mason, Mr. Antony Brett-James, Mr. Woodrow Wyatt.

I am indebted to the following authors and publishers for permission to quote extracts from their works:

Cassell & Co.: *The Second World War* by Winston S. Churchill, *The Tanks* by Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, *Panzer Battles* by Major-



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

General F. W. von Mellenthin, *Defeat Into Victory* by Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, *While Memory Serves* by Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Tuker, *Orders of the Day* by Earl Winterton, *The Happy Hunted* by Brigadier G. Clifton, *Jan Christian Smuts* by J. C. Smuts, and *The Springing Tiger* by Hugh Toye. Oxford University Press: *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* and *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, and *Infantry Brigadier* by Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger. Collins, Sons & Co.: *Rommel* by Desmond Young, *The Rommel Papers* edited by B. H. Liddell Hart, *Orde Wingate* by Christopher Sykes, and *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant. The Hutchinson Group: *The Business of War* by Major-General Sir John Kennedy. Chatto and Windus: *Eastern Epic* by Compton Mackenzie. John Murray: *Jinnah* by Hector Bolitho. Robert Hale: *Mission with Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson. Mrs. George Bambridge: 'The Roman Centurion's Song' from *The Definitive Edition of Rudyard Kipling's Verse*. The Controller, H.M. Stationery Office: *History of the Second World War*.

My especial thanks are due to:

The Librarians and library staffs of: The Royal United Service Institution, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, the India Office Library, Associated Newspapers Ltd., the Oxford and Cambridge University Club; members of the staff of Cassell & Co., and my secretary, Mrs. Millington.

Mr. James Gunn and Mr. Edward Seago for permission to reproduce their portraits of Field-Marshal Auchinleck.

Finally, not one word of this book could ever have reached print without my wife's work; without her patience, wisdom, skill, good temper, and—above all—interest in the shared task, I can never be grateful enough.

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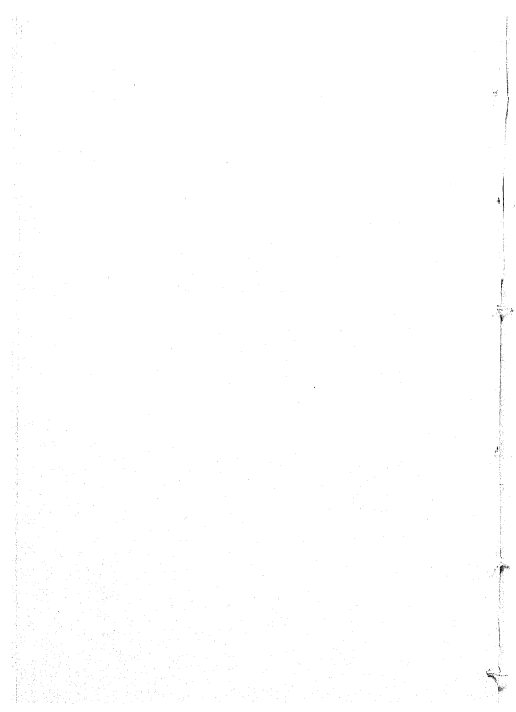
## ILLUSTRATIONS

### *Frontispiece*

Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.S.I.,  
D.S.O., O.B.E., LL.D.

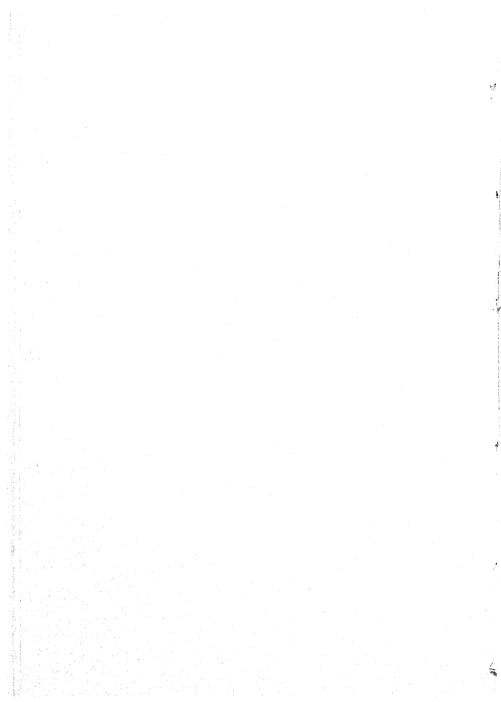
### *Between pages 520 and 521*

Mrs. John Auchinleck, the Field-Marshal's mother  
Claude Auchinleck (aged thirteen), his younger brother, Armar  
Leslie (Tiny), and his cousin, Dan Auchinleck  
Major (Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel) C. J. Auchinleck, D.S.O., 1921  
General Auchinleck and General Wavell. Cairo 1941  
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# MAPS

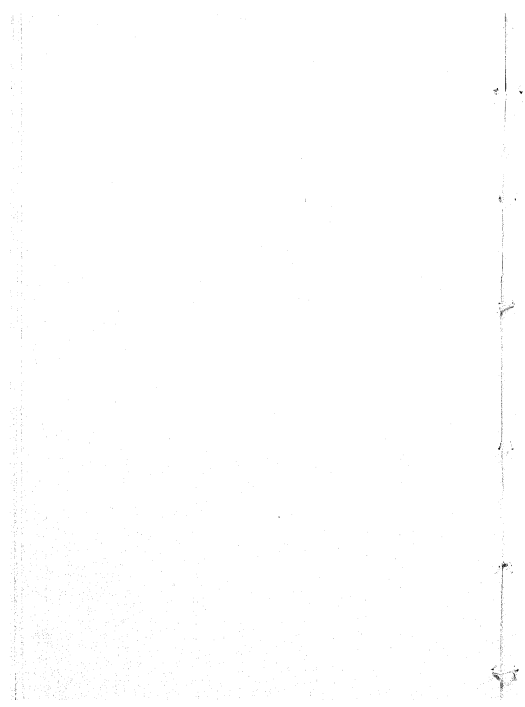
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'Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne'

*Not for ever*

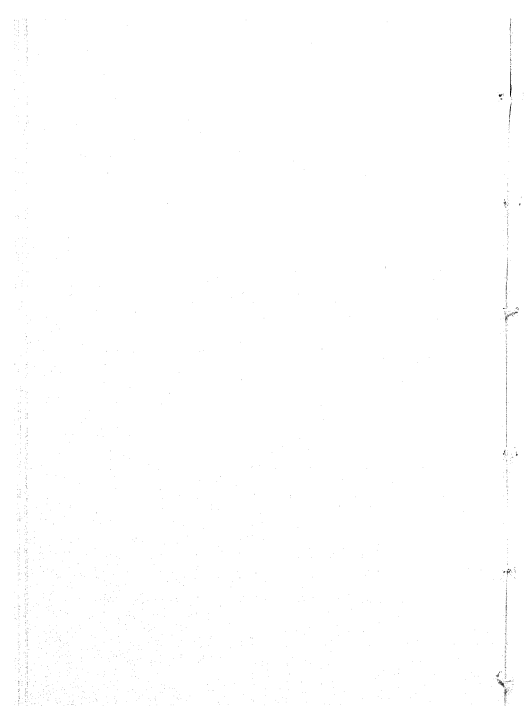






## THE ARMS OF AUCHINLECK

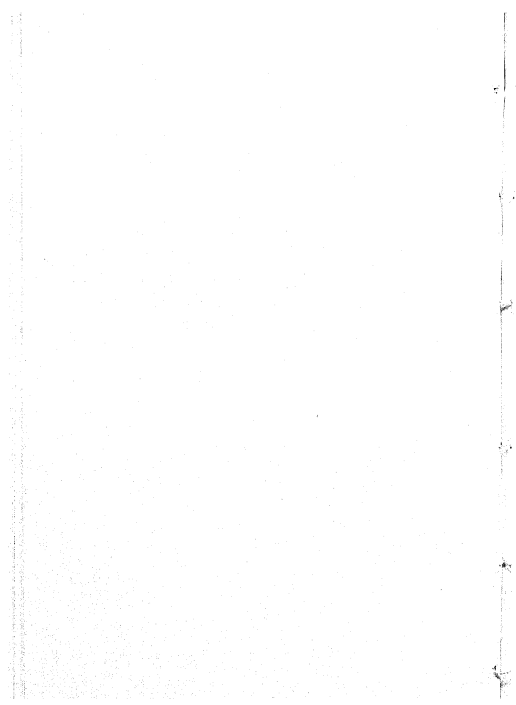
Beareth for his Achievement and Ensign Armorial Argents, Cross Counter embattled Sable, on the Dexter chieffe, a Bugle or Hunter's Horn garnished and furnished Gules and Azure. Three Stars gule of the Field above the Shield and Helmet befitting his degree. Next is placed on an Wreath for his Crest a Wheate, Stalke bladed and eared all proper. The signification of the Arms the Field being White denotes Purity or without a Spot or Blot, the Cross imbattled is given to such as have defended Castles for their Prince or Countrey, being Black signifieth Wisdom, Sobriety, a Mullet or Star in Heraldrie represents some Divine Quality bestowed from above whereby Men doe shine in Vertue Learning and Works of Piety. The Stars being Red denotes Justice, Vertue and Defence. The Bugle or Horns were the Symbols of Honour, Fortitude and Empire among Ethiecks and Hebrews. The Crest being a Blade or Stalke of Wheat signifies Community, Friendship, Fellowship and Fortitude and is the type of the Resurrection, it denotes in the Bearer, Plenty, Abundance and a Lover of Hospitality. This Achievement was got by Service in his Sovereign's Wars, the Defence of the Church, King and Country is of all most excellent and worthy. The true Institution of Arms was a Reward of Honour and Valoure not Sloath and Riches. So Honour and Valoure the Memorial of their Stock and Lencage was lastly the glory of their Name which bearing of Arms is the Signal Badge of all Honours.



## BOOK I

Auberon felt he had never known there was so good a life to be lived on earth. Always to have just some one plain and not hard thing to do; to be free to give yourself up, without a sense of shirking, to whole days of rude health, to let yourself go, with a will, in the swing of marching, the patterned dances of drill, the thrilling symbolism of guards, with the changeful chain of blithe or grave calls blown on bugles to lead you through the busy, easy day. It felt as if you were friends with whatever it was that made the world go round; you were in with the sun from rise to set, the stars you watched at night, as a sentry, were comrades moving on their appointed posts, like yourself. . . . At times it all felt so good that it almost seemed as if it must be wicked.

C. E. MONTAGUE, *Rough Justice*,  
Book Six, II, p. 231.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Soldier's Son

CLAUDE JOHN EYRE AUCHINLECK, the eldest child of Lieutenant-Colonel John Claude Alexander Auchinleck, R.H.A., and his wife, Mary Eleanor Eyre, was born at 89 Victoria Road, Aldershot, on the morning of 21 June 1884, and baptized in Holy Trinity Church, Aldershot on August 1 of that year. He was of Protestant Irish descent on both sides, Anglo-Irish landed gentry on his mother's, and Scottish Plantation stock on his father's.

The Eyres, of Eyrecourt Castle, County Galway, had been settled in Ireland for centuries. Among the recurrent characteristics of this family were a zest for life, a fiery spirit, courage, intelligence, considerable artistic talent and physical beauty. Mary Eleanor was one of the seven daughters of John Eyre, who were known throughout Ireland as 'the seven beautiful Miss Eyres'. The Eyres had been people of consequence in the West of Ireland for a long time. A peerage came their way in the eighteenth century, but it lapsed for want of a direct heir; there had been a dean and a high sheriff or two, and at the end of the eighteenth century the wildly extravagant Giles Eyre, who dissipated the family fortune, leaving when he died little but a heavily encumbered estate and the beautiful old house—miscalled a castle—in which these lovely girls grew up.

The Auchinlecks' original home was the parish of that name in Ayrshire. The name derives from the Gaelic, *ach an leach*, 'the field of the flat stone'. The village, in the heart of the countryside in which Robert Burns was born and bred (its nearest neighbours are Mauchline, Ochiltree and Old Cumnock), is on the main road from Kilmarnock to Dumfries, some fourteen miles south-east of Kilmarnock; side roads from Sorn and Airds Moss come down from the hills into the village; and its fields to this day abound in flat, shelving stones.

The family's beginnings lay far back in the storm and turbulence of early Scottish history. They made their first appearance as retainers in the train of Alan, the Lord High Steward of Scotland (and founder of the Stewart line and fortunes), and were rewarded for

their services to him with the barony from which they took their name. Nicol de Athlec of Ackinlec is mentioned among those who in the years 1292-7 made their submission to King Edward I of England; but the Laird of Auchinleck is also known to have been among the active associates of Sir William Wallace, the patriot and resistance leader, in a daring ambush near Loudoun, in the spring of 1297, on a convoy taking stores to the English garrison at Ayr.

Some time afterwards a Johannes de Auchinleck, *dominus ejusdem miles*, is recorded as endowing a convent in Paisley with an annual rent charge of twenty pounds Scots, a penance for 'a mutilation committed by him upon a monk' of the convent. During the reign of James II of Scotland the Laird of Auchinleck became a friend and follower of the great Douglas, the power of whose house was then at its zenith. Jacobus de Auchinleck, *dominus ejusdem*, was slain in a feud with Colville of Ochiltree, whose castle stood on the farther, west bank of the river Lugar, within a bowshot of Auchinleck. In 1449 the Douglas avenged his ally in the most sanguinary fashion, sacking and burning the castle of Ochiltree and putting Colville and all his male followers to the sword. John Auchinleck of that ilk, the son and successor of the murdered laird, sat in the Scottish Parliament of 1461-7.

Thereafter the family made no major mark on the pages of history. Their original castle was abandoned and another built two hundred yards farther upstream. War ravaged this part of Scotland again and again, and the countryside became poorer and poorer. The Laids of Auchinleck certainly prospered no better than their neighbours. By the beginning of the sixteenth century they were, it seems, no longer able to hold their lands. In 1504 James IV gave the barony to one Thomas Boswell who, nine years later, fought and died alongside his king and benefactor on Flodden Field. Another of James's supporters on that bleak day was an Auchinleck, landless and disinherited though he might be. In the turbulent decades that followed, no Auchinleck emerged strong and fortunate enough to win back his lost lands; and when James VI and I went to England to claim Elizabeth's throne, more than one member of the family was in his train.<sup>1</sup> The King bade them (as he bade many other

<sup>1</sup> The new holders of their ancient barony, however, fared well enough, and in due course became (in the words of a twentieth-century chronicler) 'Whiggish and respectable'. Early in the eighteenth century Alexander Boswell, a well-to-do Edinburgh advocate, became a judge of the Court of Session, and took the title of Lord Auchinleck. The castles by the banks of the river Lugar were both ruined and uninhabitable. The judge built himself a solid new house on rising ground some distance from the river.

Scottish adventurers) to go over to Ireland with the English army and told them that any land which they took in battle would legally be theirs.

The first Auchinleck whose name appears in the records of their new country was a parson, the Reverend James Auchinleck, of Cleeenish, County Fermanagh. He was born in 1646—a troublous time for Scots Protestant settlers in Ireland—and married Margaret, daughter of President Keith. He had four sons and two daughters; the elder daughter, Katherine, married one James Montgomery. The eldest son, James Auchinleck of Thomastown, was born in 1676 and married in 1698 Elizabeth, the daughter of James Corry, M.P., of Castle Coole; he died, aged seventy, in 1746, and was followed by his eldest son, James Auchinleck Junior of Thomastown. James Junior, born in 1705, married in 1734 Susanna, daughter of John Corry; they had three sons and one daughter. The third son, the Reverend Alexander Auchinleck of Castle Lodge and Mullans, Fintona, County Tyrone, was born in 1749; he married in 1784 Jane, daughter of James Lowry Eccles of Shannock, County Fermanagh, and died aged eighty-four in 1833. His third son, the Reverend John Auchinleck, was born in 1796; he became Rector of Dunboyne, County Meath, and of Ballyhack, County Wexford; in 1825 he married Katherine, the daughter of the Reverend Thomas Johnston; he died in 1870, aged seventy-four.

For two centuries the Auchinlecks were peaceable, unambitious folk, parsons and minor landed gentry. John Auchinleck, as a younger son, was the inheritor of little or no property. It was incumbent on his children to make their own way in the world. The two elder of his three sons, John Claude Alexander, born in 1835, and William Henry, born in 1841, both went into the Army, a career which for a century and a half had an abiding attraction for the Scots-Irish and the Anglo-Irish. Both were gunners. The younger saw no active service, retired as a lieutenant-colonel, R.A., married late in life and had one son, John, who served as a temporary officer in both World Wars. Colonel William Auchinleck died in 1901.

When his son, James Boswell, took his eminent London friend, Dr. Samuel Johnson, on a tour of Scotland, he was able to show him 'some venerable old trees, under the shade of which my ancestors had walked' and to boast about 'the antiquity and honourable alliances' of his family. Johnson deflated the boast characteristically: 'I see a number of people bare-footed here: I suppose you all went so before the Union. Boswell, your ancestors went so, when they had as much land as your family has now. Yet *Auchinleck* is the *Field of Stones*: there would be bad going bare-footed there. The *Lairds*, however, did it.' *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* by James Boswell.



Colonel J. C. A. Auchinleck, the father of the last Field-Marshal of the old Indian Army and the subject of this biography, first saw active service as an artillery subaltern in the Indian Mutiny in 1857. He was present at Cawnpore and other actions. Just over twenty years later he was in command of a battery of Royal Field Artillery in Lord Roberts's advance on Kabul in 1878, in the Second Afghan War.

Colonel Auchinleck married comparatively late in life, and his wife was more than fifteen years younger than he was. He was a figure of some remoteness and not much influence in the lives of his children, of whom there were four, two sons and two daughters. When Claude, his eldest son, was a year old, the Colonel was posted back to India to command the Royal Horse Artillery batteries stationed at Bangalore.

He was a zealous and efficient soldier, and his posting to the R.H.A. was very much to his taste, for he was a keen horseman and a good amateur jockey. His wife was descended from Giles Eyre, the founder of the famous Galway Blazers, and he himself was an excellent man to hounds. He became Master of the Bangalore Hounds.

Bangalore was the main military cantonment in Southern India. It wore an air—perhaps slightly deceptive—of slumbrous placidity, and it seemed an immense distance away from any sense of contemporary action. But to be a small boy in India in those days—the child, and for a year or two the only child, of the Colonel—*sahib*—was to be the focus of a little world of love and admiration. This child, therefore, like many others of his background, inheritance and epoch, was for a few years (long to live through, and abiding in the impressions which they gave) a king in a golden land, where all was sunlight, affection and overflowing kindness.

It was by a coincidence of some subsequent interest that, only a few years later, there was stationed in this same cantonment a young cavalry subaltern named Winston Spencer Churchill. India was to be of profound and enduring significance in the linked lives of both these men. But the India which the lonely, ambitious, ardently aspiring subaltern beheld and remembered differed greatly from that which was experienced by the middle-aged gunner Colonel's small son.

A second son, christened Armar Leslie, was born to Colonel and Mrs. Auchinleck at Ootacamund in the Nilgiri Hills in 1887.<sup>1</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> His family nickname was Tiny. He joined the Cameronians' 4th Special Reserve (Militia) Battalion with the intention of taking a regular commission. Just before he was due to get this commission he was hit in the

the following year the Colonel went off to active service again in the Third Burma War. His wife and sons were sent back to England. Mrs. Auchinleck was pregnant when she left India; her third child, a daughter named Cerise, was born at Cheshunt in Hertfordshire. Colonel Auchinleck retired from the Army in 1890, and the family settled at Langstone, near Havant, in Hampshire. Here a fourth and last child, a girl named Ruth, was born in 1892. Colonel Auchinleck had contracted pernicious anæmia while on service in Burma, and he was a sick man when he came home. He died in December 1892, and was buried in the churchyard at Warblington, a village on the main Portsmouth-Chichester road, half-way between Havant and Emsworth. Mrs. Auchinleck, in her early forties, was left with a family of four young children, ranging in age from eight to under a year old, to bring up on an exiguous widow's pension. She addressed herself to her task with a resolute heart and a complete lack of self-pity. She took a small house in the village where her husband lay buried. She accepted such financial help as her family and friends offered. None was rich, but her brother-in-law, Colonel William Auchinleck, in particular, was very generous. A faithful nurse came over from her old home in County Galway and helped to look after the children.

Claude was already of an age to go to school. First he boarded at a dame-school in Southsea; when he was ten he went for a couple of years to Crowthorne School, which was a preparatory school for Wellington. In the autumn term of 1896, when he was twelve years old, he went as a 'foundationer' to Wellington, whither his brother followed him, also as a 'foundationer',<sup>1</sup> three years later.

Wellington was founded as a national monument to the Iron Duke and, from the outset, was under the vigilant sponsorship of the Royal Family, in particular the Prince Consort. It was set in the rather forbidding heath and pinewood country on the southern edge of Windsor Forest, within riding distance of Sandhurst, Camberley and Aldershot; and its architect designed the main buildings as a small-scale imitation of the Palace of Versailles. Its first Master was an able and ambitious young cleric, Edward White

right eye by the lace of a football and the sight of this eye was destroyed. He entered the Colonial Civil Service and was posted to Northern Nigeria. On leave in England at the outbreak of war in 1914, he was recalled to the Camerounians and was killed on the Somme in 1916. He was, said his brother, 'without reproach'.

<sup>1</sup> His mother, as the widow of a regular officer, paid fees of £10 a year for each brother.

Benson, who subsequently became Archbishop of Canterbury and was the father of three sons who attained considerable reputations as writers, E. F., Hugh, and R. A. Benson. The stamp of its origins was strong on Wellington; its atmosphere and outlook mingled a military and Spartan quality with a certain serious progressiveness instilled by the Prince Consort. Many of its boys were destined for the Army, yet its curriculum, even in the Army Class, was far from rigidly vocational. Its ethics were simple, earnest and conscientiously Christian.

Perhaps the severest criticism that could be made of the school at this period was that it kept boys, in spirit if not in mind, curiously young. Claude Auchinleck, who was a markedly late developer, was on the whole happy there; his slightly younger contemporary, Sir Harold Nicolson, was bewildered by it.<sup>1</sup> Claude was, in boyhood as in manhood, a serenely but determinedly individual character. The determination was not that of ambition or of a ruthless will to succeed; it had the inner, deeper purpose of self-discipline. He showed at this time few of the traditional attributes of the youth who is described in school reports as 'a born leader of men'. He went to Wellington as a cheerful, quietly confident child; he left it as a tall, handsome boy, quick of temper perhaps, but generous of heart, liked and trusted by the two or three masters who knew and understood him, and mildly popular with his contemporaries.

His school career was uneventful and harmonious. It was academically rather more notable than was usual on the modern side and in the Army Class. His strong subjects, which he enjoyed, were History, Geography and English. He was weak in Mathematics, but took a number of prizes in two fields of schooling which were more highly regarded sixty years ago than now: Divinity, because to him the Old Testament seemed to be history; and the Holiday Task, because (as he explained long afterwards) he was a voracious reader, and he read the set book, whereas others scamped it.

His prowess at games was modest. He liked Rugby football, and played it forcefully enough to break his wrist at it; he represented his dormitory, but was never, as far as he was aware, considered for either the first or second fifteen. Cricket, as for many others of Scottish and Irish descent, had no appeal for him; he took up rifle-shooting instead. He became a corporal in the corps, which at that time was part of the Berkshire Regiment (Volunteers); at camp and on field days scarlet tunics were still worn. Claude Auchinleck went to Wellington the year before Queen Victoria's

<sup>1</sup> 'I entered Wellington as a puzzled baby and left it as a puzzled child.' *Some People*, p. 32.

Diamond Jubilee and left it as the South African War was dragging to its end. Large sections of the country's population during these years were more sentimentally conscious of military ardour than they had been for a long time. Wellington, with its numerous deep, traditional and family attachments to the Army, was less severely infected than many other schools. Boys at Wellington took the Army for granted; Claude Auchinleck, from the time that he was quite a small boy, had no thought of any other career. His closest friends were single-minded in the same unself-conscious fashion; two at least of these, who remained his friends in after-life, were characteristic: M. C. Baldwin, who like Claude entered the Indian Army, commanded the 1st Gurkha Rifles, was severely wounded in Mesopotamia in 1916, and married his friend's younger sister, Ruth; and Lewis ('Piggy') Heath, who distinguished himself in command of 5th Indian Division at Keren in 1941 and subsequently, on Auchinleck's recommendation, became Commander of III Corps in Malaya.

Although there was a certain bleakness about Wellington—especially in winter—and the régime was austere and hardy, there were at least two important civilizing elements in the life of the school. The first was the Dormitory system. The Dormitory, consisting of some thirty boys, was the basic unit of the school's composition and administration. Each Dormitory was a long, rectangular chamber, connected with its fellows by gaslit stone staircases with severe iron gates on each landing; the Dormitories were partitioned into cubicles, in each of which the principal articles of furniture were the bed, the desk and the round tin bath. They were not particularly sumptuous apartments; their adornments could to some extent be increased, in accordance with their occupants' tastes and pockets. But they ensured to every boy a real degree of privacy: his cubicle, for nine months of his year, was his home; if necessity arose it could be his fortress. Auchinleck, in the 'Beresford' Dormitory—named after Marshal Beresford of Peninsular War fame—had the same cubicle from the day he went to Wellington to the day he left. He became a Dormitory Prefect, which carried minor responsibility and authority, but conveyed the privilege of hanging up your cap in the ante-chapel when you went in to worship.

The other civilizing element in life at Wellington at this time was the Master, Bertram Pollock (subsequently Bishop of Norwich), of whose urbane and sophisticated wisdom, and of its effect on an impressionable boy, Sir Harold Nicolson has given a vivid account. It was mildly to be regretted that Auchinleck was never close enough to Pollock to come under this amiable influence. Perhaps it was, as

he himself later believed, that he was too immature; or perhaps it was that to the snobbish side of Pollock, the son of an eminent and still rising diplomatist, himself destined for Balliol College, Oxford, was of more interest than the widow's child, the big, fresh-faced founder in the Army Class, whom it took a good deal of effort to know and understand.

Despite this minor deprivation, Auchinleck's years at Wellington were happy enough. He was neither troubled nor exalted by the extremely conventional religious atmosphere of the school, though he was aware of a degree of emotional disturbance in the weeks before his confirmation. Among his major assets, then as throughout his life, was his physical health. His strength was not deployed in aggressively athletic pursuits; neither physically nor mentally did he seem under any compulsion to assert himself, or to show off; but he had stamina beyond the ordinary measure. Resting on this physical basis, his fortitude was suffused with imaginative intuition and perception. He was modest and well-liked by his contemporaries, but his school career was not of the kind which is remembered long afterwards, either as the peak of a man's achievement or as the clearly defined, preliminary reflection or echo of all that he is later to do and to be. He was a boy as yet un moulded to his manhood's pattern.

At home in the holidays his life was tranquil, affectionate and happy. From their early childhood both he and his brother exercised their imaginations on military themes. The works of G. A. Henty were amongst their favourite reading, and they staged great campaigns with lead soldiers, not only indoors but outside in the garden when a wider use of 'terrain' was required. On these major exercises they had too few soldiers at their disposal (this was to be a not unfamiliar experience later), and flowers were enlisted as combatants—a practice which singularly failed to amuse their mother, who was a keen and skilled gardener. Claude soon discovered the delights of map-reading and map-making.<sup>1</sup> The children acquired bicycles and the four of them explored the lanes and by-ways of Hayling Island, and Claude made sketch-maps of their routes.

In the autumn term of 1901, some months after he had passed his

<sup>1</sup> There is in existence a battered exercise-book containing eighteen pages of the manuscript of a story (unfortunately uncompleted) entitled *The Land of the Pigmies* by C.J.A. and C.E.D.G.A., with illustrations by C.J.A. The text is in several hands, including that of C.J.A. showing remarkably little change across some sixty years. It begins, 'In the year 17— I Augustus Anchovy was cast ashore on a Lost Isle.' There are two maps of the island and ten water-colour drawings, all by C.J.A., inset in the text.

seventeenth birthday, Claude Auchinleck took the entrance examination for the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. This of itself was an imposed second choice: he would have preferred to have gone like his father and his uncle before him to the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich and from there into the Royal Artillery or the Royal Engineers. This was impossible in view of his weakness at mathematics. Sandhurst it had to be, and thereafter the Indian Army. He had no private means of any kind, and he could not have lived on his pay in even the quietest, least snobbish of British infantry regiments. He could not bear the prospect of the West India Regiment which was, at that time, regarded as the destination of the impecunious, the failures, and those without connexions.

Entry into the Indian Army was then controlled by a candidate's placing in the order of merit in the entrance examination into the R.M.C. A boy who passed into Sandhurst among the first batch of forty-five to fifty was thus assured of his place in the Indian Army throughout his career as a cadet, provided that his conduct was satisfactory. This system was coming to its end;<sup>1</sup> but Auchinleck benefited from it. He passed in forty-fifth, taking the last place allocated to the Indian Army. Wellington, his family and the boy himself were all equally surprised and pleased. It was the first decisive test in his life, and he had passed it.

He entered Sandhurst in January 1902. A bleak winter merged into a bitter, cold spring. It was a time of developing ferment in British society as a whole, and in the Army in particular. Queen Victoria had died exactly a year earlier, and the Coronation of King Edward VII had been arranged for the following June. The South African War dragged ingloriously to its conclusion, and peace discussions were being mooted; the Queen of the Netherlands offered to mediate between the opposing Governments; Lord Milner wrote to a friend that he hoped to see the Boer leaders, Botha, De Wet and De la Rey, taking part in the Coronation procession. The conduct of the war, logistically as well as tactically, was causing a good deal of heart-searching in high places. The Esher Committee had yet to sit and to make its far-reaching recommendations, but the future of the Army was clearly in the melting-pot. Sandhurst was

<sup>1</sup> Five or six years later it had changed; cadets passed out, in order of merit, at the end of their career. By 1907 it was necessary to pass out in the first thirty to be sure of an Indian Army vacancy; there were rare occasions when thirty-five got over this hurdle. In June 1908, as F.M. Montgomery has recounted in his *Memoirs*, he was bitterly disappointed when he passed out thirty-sixth.

not unaffected by the general atmosphere of change and indecision. It was not perhaps an especially good time in which to be a gentleman cadet.

Auchinleck, however, displaying his capacity for adjusting to circumstances, settled down happily enough for the brief year that he was there. He was posted to E Company. The total of cadets was only 360, divided into six companies, all housed in what later became known as the Old Building. Their working uniform was blue serge jacket and trousers, and they wore blue strapped overalls and wellington boots for riding. For full dress and ceremonial parades they had scarlet tunics and blue spiked helmets; they also had to have scarlet mess kit. For the impecunious these items of dress had a long career of usefulness after they were commissioned. Auchinleck's, as it happened, was the last generation of cadets to wear the blue uniform: a junior term arrived in August 1902, and they were issued with the new drab (khaki) serge as a working dress. Among this new term there arrived his friend from Wellington, M. C. Baldwin, whose mother lived in Camberley and was kind and hospitable to Auchinleck.

The tone of the R.M.C. at the time was perhaps not good. The Commandant was a remote figure—in the cadets' eyes fantastically aged—who appeared once a week at Church Parade, dressed in a blue frock coat and a cocked hat. There was not a little indiscipline and hazing. Among the cadets there were a good many rich young men, destined for crack regiments, who could afford to hunt and shoot and take expensive trips to London. Auchinleck was certainly not in this set; he did not envy its members, but noticed, quietly enough, that exclusion from it could affect a cadet's chances of distinguishing himself. He passed through Sandhurst very much as he had passed through Wellington. Having won his Indian Army vacancy, he was not perhaps as industrious as he ought to have been, and he was dismayed when he saw how many places he had dropped in the passing-out list. On the whole his year as a cadet made little impression on him. He did not enjoy the riding school, where the instruction was routine and unimaginative. He enjoyed field engineering, the outdoor tactical exercises (such as they were), and the sketching and mapping. He passed out in the eighties, and left Sandhurst without regret in December 1902.

He was eighteen and a half years old. He was among some thirty cadets who were awarded commissions in the Indian Army. These young officers were given first-class passages to India in the P. & O. liner *Britannia*, which sailed from Tilbury in March 1903.

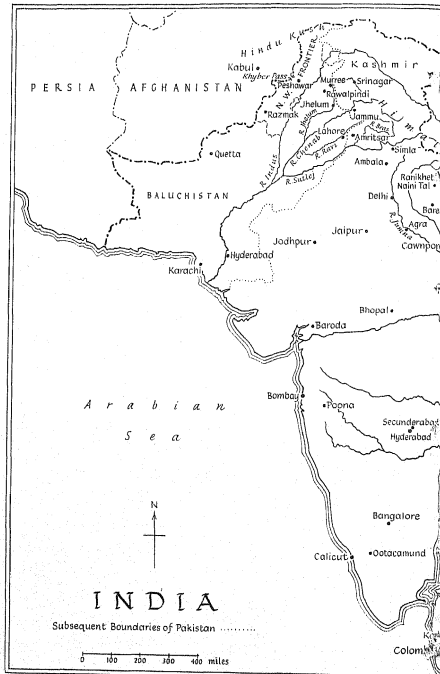
The night before he sailed the boy spent in 'a pretty dingy lodging'

in London with his mother and his aunt, Mrs. Cerise Beaver.<sup>1</sup> The grown man who possesses imagination and sensitivity can recall, when time, responsibility, war, grief and fame have all done their work, what it was to be a boy setting out for the first time. It was a long, sad, wakeful night for young Auchinleck; and the parting next day, on the edge of the grey wastes of the Thames estuary, was just as painful. It was one of the few occasions in his life on which Auchinleck felt that his world was falling in. His mother smiled and waved, and the ship pulled out to sea.

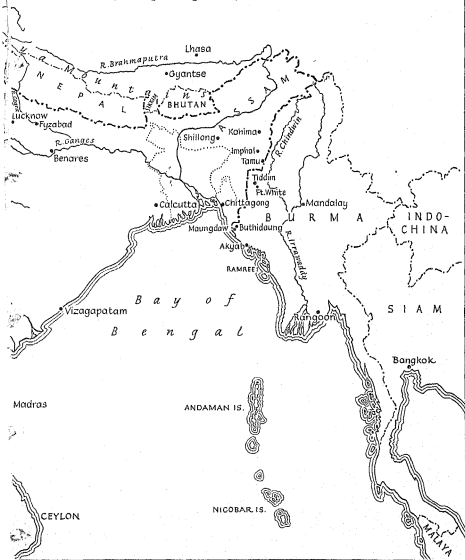
There were thirty of his own contemporaries in so-called first-class cabins in the bows of the ship. He was young and very resilient, and he was going to India.

<sup>1</sup> Fifth of the seven daughters of John Eyre, widow of Hugh Edward Campbell Beaver of Bryn Glas, Montgomeryshire, and mother of Sir Hugh Beaver (b. 1890), President of the Federation of British Industries 1957-8, and Managing Director of Arthur Guinness Ltd.





T I B E T



## CHAPTER TWO

### India at Peace

THE young men immensely enjoyed the voyage out to India. More than fifty years afterwards Auchinleck remembered it as 'tremendous fun'. Among the older officers returning from home leave was the Adjutant of the 1/5th Gurkhas, Captain (subsequently Brigadier-General) W. D. Villiers-Stuart. He offered Auchinleck his support if he applied to join this regiment. Villiers-Stuart wrote many years later:

The Lieutenant-Colonels commanding used to bid some of us to look for good young officers for our 1/5th Gurkhas when moving around. Of course the moment I saw Auchinleck on board the ship going out to India, I knew he was the very thing for us, and every day of the voyage confirmed me in that opinion. But there was another reason for my being so interested in trying to get him for the Regiment—Sir (as he became) James Stewart, who commanded the 2/5th at the time, had, oddly enough, told me that he was deeply interested in anyone of that name, and that I must take special notice of, and interest in, anyone of the name whom I came across among subalterns. When I told Sir James on my return to duty, he was greatly delighted, and took the matter out of my hands and applied for Auchinleck *at once*. That far I know. At the end of a year with a British Regiment, I hoped to see Sir Claude at Abbottabad. But alas for us; when the time came he was far too generous-hearted to leave his Punjabi friends. . . .

Half-fledged and awkward as he knew himself to be, the young Auchinleck took Villiers-Stuart's offer as a great compliment. He was entirely without influence or connexions; he was not aware that he had any friends in India; all his father's former comrades were dead or retired, and he could not know that both his own personal qualities and the memory of his father's name prompted the offer.

The India to which he went, in whose Army he was to serve for close on forty-five years, was at the beginning of a period of momentous change, socially, politically and militarily. Lord Curzon was its young, energetic and ambitious Viceroy. Lord Kitchener, whose reputation in Britain and the Empire at large was at its zenith, was but lately arrived to assume the post of Commander-in-Chief, fresh from victory in South Africa and the peace negotiations at Vereeniging, in which he had played a decisive part. This Indian appointment was one on which he had set his heart from the day on which he had succeeded Lord Roberts as Commander-in-Chief in Pretoria. He had strong, well-marshalled views on the reforms which he wished to see introduced into the British Army, and he had communicated them to the Secretary of State for War before he left Africa. He was no less eager to reform the Indian Army from top to bottom; and he set about this process within a few days of landing on Indian soil at the end of 1902.

The bitter conflict which developed between Kitchener and Curzon was of no immediate concern to a youthful subaltern on his first posting to India; but the far-reaching administrative reforms in the Indian Army, which Kitchener put through at high speed, the arguments for and against which entangled the Viceroy and the C.-in-C., and many other important personages in India, in protracted and ferocious quarrels, were to have the sharpest impact on his life, then and for many years afterwards.

It is necessary to see these reforms, first against the general background of what was happening in India, and then to explore them in some detail. Nearly fifty years had passed since the Mutiny, in which Auchinleck's father had seen his first active service as a subaltern; but the shadow of this disastrous episode lay heavily still across the sub-continent. It had smeared Indo-British relationships with blood and persistent mutual distrust. Its memories, transmuted into myths, in part of heroism and fortitude, but in part also of vengeance and counter-vengeance, had passed into the general racial consciousness on both sides, with deplorable—and in the ultimate analysis tragic—results.

This was post-Mutiny India, at the beginning of the slow sunset epoch of a power which was already dwindling, though to the outward eye it seemed majestic and unquestioned. It was an India in which, for the first time in many æons, communications were being quickened. The roads and the railways had come to India, and the telegraph wires were buzzing between city and city, cantonment and cantonment. Rural India might still appear to be wrapped in all its ancient, slumbrous tranquillity—the soft pad-pad of the

bullocks' patient feet on the dusty track, the creak of the waggon wheels, the shrill, sharp cry of a child or a bird across the noonday heat—but in the cities there were all sorts of murmurous awakenings. Political consciousness, that sense of nationhood and that longing for its independent expression, which in less than twenty years' time were to sweep the whole of India, were beginning to stir among the urban, university-educated intellectuals. A little over a year after Second-Lieutenant C. J. E. Auchinleck arrived in India, of which he had only childish but deeply formative recollections, the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, launched his proposals for the partition of Bengal; it was amongst the Bengali intellectuals, fiercely opposed on grounds of principle as well as sentiment to the partition of their country, that the seeds of Indian nationalism were first sown. At the climax of his career Auchinleck was to have to deal with the ultimate results of the flowering and fulfilment of those nationalist aspirations.

So far as the British in India were concerned, the first years of the twentieth century were not only still the post-Mutiny era: they were also the post-Kipling era. Kipling's genius had profoundly affected the British view of India, and the British view of themselves in India. His vision of India was not, of course, completely comprehensive; it was brilliantly illuminating, as it communicated itself to thousands upon thousands of readers of his prose and verse; and it was a good deal more accurate and more profound than many of his later critics were to allow. The India at which the raw, excited young officer looked was, to a greater extent than he was himself probably aware, the India which Kipling had beheld and depicted. It was the India, certainly, of Mrs. Hauksbee and of the British other ranks of *Soldiers Three*; but it was, too, the real and magical India of *Kim*, of Mahbub Ali, Hurree Chunder, of the lama whose *chela* Kim became, and of the outspoken old dowager *sahibah* from Saharunpore. It was this India which was to have its appeal for and its hold on Claude Auchinleck, which he was to serve, to know, love and understand as did few others of his race and generation who lived and worked in the country.

Such was the background. In the foreground was the ruthlessly energetic programme of administrative reform of the Indian Army, launched a little earlier but taken up with the utmost zeal by Kitchener in this very year of 1903. For his first twelve months in the country young Auchinleck was, to a great extent, aware only of the background. It was customary to attach newly commissioned infantry officers of the Indian Army, on their arrival in the country, to a battalion of British infantry for a year's probation and initial training in their duties before their final posting to an Indian unit.

Auchinleck, with five others who had come out with him, was sent to the 2nd King's Shropshire Light Infantry (85th K.L.I.) who had lately reached India from service in the field in South Africa. By the time the young men landed at Bombay, the regiment had already moved to its hot-weather station at Ranikhet, six thousand feet up in the Himalayas near Naini Tal. Thither they made their way.

To one at least of those six boys the long journey, first by train to the railhead at the foot of the Himalayas, and then on hired ponies for three days up to Ranikhet, was an experience—a revelation and an initiation—which he never forgot.

Auchinleck enjoyed his year with the British battalion. He and his companions were welcomed, were treated well, and were taught the beginnings of their duties, responsibilities and outlook as officers. They were luckier than some others on similar attachments to British regiments, who found themselves—though they had gone through the mill of the same schools and of Sandhurst—treated by their brother officers as inferior beings. This was particularly so in fashionable and expensive units which were called (quite erroneously) 'good regiments'; it was perhaps a survival of former times, when 'Queen's officers' had looked down on the 'John Company' officers, Auchinleck was fortunate to be spared it.

However, he was not without his minor troubles. An outbreak of cholera sent the regiment into camp in the surrounding hills, and his living expenses troubled him. There is in existence a letter which he wrote to his mother on 16 September 1903. He acknowledged the receipt on the previous day of a letter from her and another from Tiny, his younger brother. He went on, with forlorn candour: 'I sent a wire today asking you for £10. I am sorry . . . you know how I hate asking you for it. But I am broke; and I find a little overdrawn at Grindlay.'

His explanation of his plight was truthful, detailed and apologetic. He had had to pay Rs120 for his tent, Rs30 for his camp bed, Rs15 for his servant's tent, Rs17 (about) for his haversack and water-bottle, and an unstated amount for his blankets ('I had none and we want them in camp').

His loving and conscience-stricken recognition of the magnitude of the demand which he was making led him into an even more meticulous account of his monthly expenditure. 'Mess-bills are high, and this is an expensive regiment. . . . The messing alone comes to Rs90 odd, and everyone *has* to pay that. Then if you only drink sodas and lemonades, the drink bill comes to about Rs10 more and guests and Club Bill, subscriptions, etc. bring it up to Rs150 to

Rs180, and pay is Rs215, so it does not leave much, but once I am square I can manage. . . .'

For the rest of his letter he strove to be less doleful and more informative:

I am doing Mess President out here, and I have to get all the things to feed on and drink out from the Mess. We have been doing a good deal of Semaphore. . . . I went to call on the General on Sunday. He is a Colonel Wheatley really, commanding the district. He used to be in the 3rd Gurkhas. They are very nice and Miss Wheatley (grown-up daughter) knew Cherry at Bath when first she (Cherry) went there. We had an awful wet day yesterday and last night the wind was very strong quite a gale sometimes. There is nothing to tell you about. I am stupid today. I am so sorry about the money. . . . I wish I could have kept myself. I will soon I hope. I thought once I got here I would be off your hands; now it is worse than ever. . . . The Munshi<sup>1</sup> has just come. . . .

The young man, though conscious of his own and his family's poverty, was not in the slightest embittered by or resentful of the wealth of others; but he had, both by inheritance and by environment, a strong dislike of debt, and he strove never, if he could possibly avoid it, to incur it.

This trouble dealt with, the rest of Auchinleck's time with this expensive but pleasant British regiment passed agreeably enough. In the cold weather the K.S.L.I. moved down on to the plains, and training continued. As the hot weather began he went to join the Indian regiment to which he was to be permanently posted. This was one of the great turning-points of his life.

A New Model Indian Army was being fashioned by Kitchener's firm and massive hand. But in its old pattern, this Army had a long and honourable record in the history of both the peoples who built it up and served in it. It had developed out of the three separate armies of the Presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Bengal, established by the East India Company. Its outlook and traditions were well summed up in an address given, some fifty-five years earlier, to the cadets of the Company's Military Seminary at Addiscombe by Major-General Sir Archibald Galloway, on 12 December 1849:

You have hitherto been under the care of others. You are now

<sup>1</sup> The instructor in native languages, whose ministrations were an essential part of every young officer's early career.

to be left to yourselves. You are to join the Indian Army. The achievements of that army, within a period of amazing briefness, have won for the arms of England unfading honour. That army has conquered for the crown of England a magnificent empire. You, my young friends, now so young, will one day be the guardians of that great empire—to you, gentlemen and to your comrades, will be committed the discipline and the honour of that army, and the continuance of its renown. How is this to be attained? I have told you before, and I will tell you again. It is by the untiring energy, the self-devotion, the daring of its British officers. It is by commanding the confidence, by winning the affections of your men; you will thus secure the faithful energy of the native army; and it is thus you will lead them to incessant victory. No matter what odds, to fight has been to conquer. But, gentlemen, remember the attainments required of you before you be worthy of the command of such men. They are strangers to you in manners, in customs, and in religion. You must acquire their language first of all. You must learn their customs. You must respect their religious ceremonies. You must not only be their officer, but their friend. They will lean upon you as such. They will tell you their wants and their grievances, and you will listen to them and procure their redress. You must know every man in your company, and call them all by their names. You must be just and kind and patient with them, but not familiar, and you must exact from them freely every duty. An army of full 250,000 men, backed by upwards of 30,000 of the illustrious army of England, for such is the Indian Army—an army so officered and so united, so united and so led, can never be overthrown.

The Mutiny, confined as it was to certain units of one army only—that of Bengal—certainly did not destroy the outlook thus eloquently expressed. After the Mutiny the last vestiges of Company control disappeared from India; service in India, whether military, civilian or political, became imperial service. But the Indian Army was never merged into the British Army; constitutionally and administratively it remained, to the end, a separate force. Ten years after the Mutiny the Imperial Crown replaced the Company's badge—the Lion and the Crown—in all regimental insignia; but it was not until 1895 that the three Presidency Armies were amalgamated, and even then it was not thought wise to introduce any major changes in the organization or designations of the units of which they were composed. By the turn of the century it was obvious that reform could not long be postponed.



When Kitchener came upon the scene, the first steps towards great and fundamental changes in the organization and administration of the Army had been taken. They were the response to major historical developments. The tide of expansion, of conquest and consolidation had, throughout the major part of the previous century, set consistently north-westwards, up and across the sub-continent. All three of the old Presidencies had become military backwaters. It was in the north-west that the chances of active service were to be found; inevitably, young and ambitious officers strove to take commissions with the regiments enlisted in the north—the Gurkhas, the Sikhs, the Punjab Frontier Force and the Punjabis—and these regiments enjoyed much the same reputation as the Guards. It is not true or fair to say, as does Lord Kitchener's biographer, that 'prolonged peace and an enervating climate had sapped the martial virtues of the southern regiments, as much as experience of warfare and unsettled conditions had fostered these qualities among the virile races of North India'. But it certainly was true that by the beginning of the twentieth century 'most southern regiments were held in such contempt that British officers with means and influence contrived to avoid service with them'.<sup>1</sup> This was unfortunately applicable to the Madras regiments, many of which had martial associations and traditions dating back well over a century, and the sepoys in which had been enlisted, generation by generation, from the same families. It was true, to a lesser degree, of the Bombay Army, and even of the older regiments of the Bengal Army.

The reason for this unpopularity with British officers, and for any decline in efficiency and morale, was that these regiments were employed far too frequently and for far too long on garrison duties in regions in which profound peace reigned, and were prevented from seeing active service in troubled districts or overseas. The injustice and the imprudence of deducing summarily, from this prolonged misemployment, that the peoples of India could be divided into 'martial' and 'non-martial' races were demonstrated effectively and dramatically in both World Wars, when men recruited from all over India, and not merely from the so-called 'virile' peoples of the north-west, showed that, if they were properly led, they could be as valiant as any other soldiers in the world. And it was not without irony that it fell to Claude Auchinleck, who as a young soldier first joining his regiment was caught up in the process and the immediate effects of Kitchener's reorganization, to give, forty years later—as

<sup>1</sup> *Kitchener, Portrait of an Imperialist* by Sir Philip Magnus, p. 199.

Commander-in-Chief—the final lie to the theory on which, in part at any rate, that reorganization was based.

Kitchener shrewdly and accurately assessed the strategic mistake underlying the misuse of the Army. He wrote to his friend and confidante, Lady Salisbury, on 30 December, 1902, when he had been in India less than five weeks: 'The idea that pervades everyone in India is that the army is intended to hold India against the Indians. . . . I think this is a wrong policy.'<sup>1</sup> It was folly, he believed, to continue to think in terms of the Mutiny. The Army's main task, he was convinced, was no longer to support the civil power in remote districts, but to guard the frontiers against external attack. His authority was immense, his influence pervasive. He taught generations of officers, both in units and on the staff, to look to the north-west, to the exclusion of almost the whole of the rest of India. In the course of time it became customary even to ignore the other, the north-eastern, frontier.

Kitchener found the Army, as he told Lady Salisbury seven months later, when he was already putting his measures of reorganization into effect, 'scattered all higgledy-piggledy over the country, without any system or reason whatever'.<sup>2</sup> There may once have been a system, but it had hardened into meaningless routine; perhaps there were reasons, and the record of them may have been obliterated in those masses of ancient files which he made his A.D.C.s pound into powder and transform into papier mâché, 'in order to provide, economically, for the construction of his ceilings'<sup>3</sup> in Snowdon, his official house at Simla, which (according to his custom) he largely transformed and rebuilt.

He decided, in accordance with the best continental military practice and as a consequence of his own experience in South Africa, that the Army should be reorganized on a basis of corps and divisions, in standard units of approximately equal size and strength. It was to be deployed strictly in fulfilment of the strategic purpose which he envisaged for it. The garrisons dotted all over India were to be cut to the minimum compatible with a conception of internal security which was not conditioned by the circumstances of the Mutiny. He thereby immediately saved enough manpower to form nine field divisions instead of the four which he had inherited from his old-fashioned and somewhat lethargic predecessor.

These nine divisions were henceforth to be deployed along two main axes meeting at Peshawar: the northern axis of five divisions guarded the frontier along a line from Peshawar to Lucknow; the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 198.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 204.

southern axis of four divisions, with one held forward at Quetta, faced Afghanistan. This, says Kitchener's biographer, was the first time that the divisional system was effectively applied in India; and he claims that the reorganization was 'an immense improvement'.

It had been preceded in 1902, before Kitchener's arrival, by the reconstitution of fourteen southern regiments and their replacement by units recruited from the northern peoples. The oldest and one of the most famous of the reconstituted units was the 2nd Madras Infantry, first raised in 1758-9, at the height of the Seven Years War, when England and France were locked in conflict over great areas of the world's surface, including India. Through many vicissitudes this regiment had preserved its identity; between 1760 and the date of its reconstitution it had won no fewer than thirteen battle honours. Its Madrassi rank and file were mustered out, about half of them volunteering to serve in other Madras regiments which were not being reconstituted, the remainder accepting the pensions and gratuities which the Government offered.

Kitchener insisted, in the face of considerable opposition, that all the regiments of the Indian Army should be renumbered and renamed, on what he considered to be a consistent pattern. In this renaming all mention of the old Presidency Army designations was omitted. In October 1903, therefore, the 2nd Madras Infantry became known as the 62nd Punjabis; it was then being reconstituted at Fyzabad in the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). Only three British officers, one major, one lieutenant and one second-lieutenant, who had been serving with the old regiment were transferred to the new. Major Rainey Robinson of the 12th Burma Infantry was appointed its first Commanding Officer. Subedars, jemadars and N.C.O.s were posted from existing Punjabi and other units, including the recently disbanded Hong Kong Regiment of Punjabi Muslims. After a winter on attachment with the K.S.L.I. in the plains, Second-Lieutenant Auchinleck was posted to the 62nd in April 1904, some two months before his twentieth birthday. The initial processes of reorganization and new recruitment—the latter not at all easy, since the recruitment areas were far away from Fyzabad and recruiting detachments, under British officers, had had to fill their rolls within a specified time—had by this time been accomplished, and the regiment was shaking down to its new pattern.

It consisted of seven hundred young soldiers, Sikhs, Punjabis and Rajputs. There was a morning freshness about everything that happened; the atmosphere was predominantly one of youthful enthusiasm and zest. Officers and men were new to each other and to

their shared way of life. Veterans were few, and for the most part they were all learning together the real business of soldiering. Auchinleck was fortunate in having joined such a regiment at such a time; and he was wise enough to recognize his own fortune. When he had been with them for about a year he was offered the transfer to the 5th Gurkhas which was a result of Colonel James Stewart's application for him two years before. He refused, despite the fact that it was a 'crack' regiment, stationed permanently on the Frontier. He had by then become part of the 62nd and did not wish to move.

To himself he characteristically explained away a decision, which was primarily of the heart, in prosaic economic terms. It would mean, he told himself, considerable expense. He would have to buy an entirely new uniform, he argued, full dress, mess kit, horse furniture and so forth. He had only lately, like all his brother officers, bought his uniform, his sword, his revolver, his field-glasses, his charger and his regulation saddlery. The change would mean a sudden large further outlay, and he would be bound to run heavily into debt.

These were important considerations, but in fact they only helped to strengthen a resolution which he had already made. Tempting as the offer was, he never regretted that he refused it. There followed for him ten happy, energetic years of peace-time soldiering in which step by step he was able to acquire proficiency in his chosen profession. The men he had come to serve alongside and to lead were volunteers all of them, and they were the sons of yeomen. There was an honourable simplicity about them, a moral and spiritual solidarity which, on any alien soul that possessed any degree of sensibility, made a great and durable impression. It was a privilege to be their comrade. The young Auchinleck sought to make himself worthy of the command of such men. He learned the languages which they spoke. He came to understand and to respect their customs and their religious observances and ceremonies. As a good officer must in any army, he learned to know his men; but as he did this, like the best of those who had gone before him in this service, he learned to know about Indians in general and about India. The young man whose childish hobby had been drawing maps had a deeper quality than the 'eye for country' which his profession was customarily supposed to demand: he could apprehend the sense and feel of a country.

Fyzabad, which lies on the plains between the Ganges and the Himalayan foothills, was a pleasant 'regulation pattern' station, holding in normal times an Indian cavalry regiment, a battery of British field artillery, a British infantry battalion and an Indian infantry battalion, commanded by a brigadier. The cold-weather

months, which in this part of India are of a tingling, unforgettable beauty, were either spent by the brigade as a whole in training camps away from the cantonments, or by the officers of the Indian battalion on detachment in the countryside whence their men were recruited. By the end of March or the beginning of April they were back in cantonments for the summer; and the summers were torrid until the monsoon broke in June. Thereafter the country was suddenly lush and vividly green, and the air steamy, murmurous and many-scented. There were recurrent outbreaks of cholera, and those who could went off on leave. For most of the year there were not more than ten British officers at duty with an Indian battalion. Thus it was taken for granted that Auchinleck, three months after he had joined the 62nd, and barely twenty years of age, should command a double company of two hundred men, in place of the regular commander who had gone on leave.

Responsibility of this magnitude seldom came the way of British Service officers in peace time. The value of the training which it gave in the command and the leadership of men cannot be doubted. The concept of 'man management' which became fashionable towards the end of World War II was not a new one; the Indian other ranks needed to be 'managed' just as much as any other breed of soldier. And with the British officer, though he was advised and loyally sustained by his Indian officers,<sup>1</sup> there remained the ultimate, solitary responsibility of decision. Boys found their manhood by shouldering it.

By 1906 the battalion was considered fit for outpost duty beyond and along the frontiers of India. It moved up to the north and north-east, half going to Tibet and Sikkim and half many hundreds of miles away to Assam. The Tibet 'wing', with which Auchinleck went, consisted of two double companies, all Muslim Punjabis and Pathans. Auchinleck was put in command of the farthest detachment of about a hundred men, who were stationed at Gyantse, some two hundred miles inside Tibet, on the road to Lhasa. These remote outposts were not set up with expansionist intentions, but in fulfilment of the vigilant outlook which, under Curzon and Kitchener, had become habitual in British India.<sup>2</sup> Tsarist Russia had expanded

<sup>1</sup> Originally known as Native Officers and subsequently as Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (V.C.O.s), a body of men unique in character and standing, and of the utmost importance and value in the Indian Army throughout its history.

<sup>2</sup> Two years before the 62nd Punjabis went to Tibet, Colonel (later Sir) Francis Younghusband had led his famous Mission into this hitherto im-

and colonized ruthlessly over vast areas in central Asia; there were many indications that her most ambitious generals were not disposed to regard the great wall of the world's highest mountain range as an insuperable barrier.<sup>1</sup> The Government of India took the threat very seriously.

As it happened, the period during which the 62nd Punjabis were on detachment was quite peaceful, though of considerable importance in Auchinleck's personal life and development. He matured steadily. He was in his first independent command, after only three years of service; his enjoyment of it indeed was enhanced by its remoteness—there was a single telegraph line connecting Gyantse with the rest of the world and the post came by runner once a week—and by the fact that included in his command were twenty-five ponies, for use in mounted infantry work. This was splendidly different from life in a cantonment in the plains, with its social round, its bumble-puppy polo, its duck and partridge shooting, its pigsticking (in which Auchinleck did not take part) and its haunting fear of expense which would put a young officer grievously in debt. In three years he had had no more than an occasional week-end's leave; he had never been able to afford the long jaunt to the hills in the summer or a *shikar* in the jungle. Now duty had set him in the middle of one of the most majestic landscapes in the world; he had marched to it across Himalayan passes rising to seventeen thousand feet; Gyantse itself was over twelve thousand feet above sea-level, and hundreds of miles from any supervisory authority; and here he lived and worked very happily for a year. He was twenty-three years old, in excellent health and tingling with zest and cheerfulness.

There were no distractions to spend money on. It was true that in January 1907 someone rather richer than Auchinleck imported a small runabout motor—the first of its kind ever seen in Tibet—which had to be carried across the passes on the backs of porters and mules. It was reassembled at Gyantse, and Auchinleck photo-

penetrable country, in order (as instructed by Lord Curzon) to establish permanent British representation there, with the object of countering Russian (and Chinese) influence and of preventing Tibetan encroachment over the frontier into Sikkim.

<sup>1</sup> One of the main themes of the latter part of *Kim*—the chase and defeat of some Russian spies by Kim and Hurree Chunder, in company with the lama, in the hills along the Indian frontier—was by no means as fanciful as might be supposed.

graphed it, with two civilians up<sup>1</sup> and a large, woolly dog sniffing suspiciously at its back axle, on the parade ground of his detachment.

One of his few British companions on this enterprise was a young member of the Indian Political Service, diplomatically described as the British Trade Agent at Gyantse. His name was F. M. Bailey; he had been Auchinleck's senior by two years at Wellington and Sandhurst; he was a member of the Tibet Expedition of 1903-4 and of an exploration party in western Tibet in the following year. The small difference in age, which had mattered a good deal when they were boys, was now of no importance: they became close friends. Bailey was intelligent and ambitious. Already a member of a *corps d'élite*, he was destined to attain a notable reputation as an explorer before he was thirty; and after active service in Mesopotamia in World War I he went, in the late summer of 1918, on a highly adventurous journey to Tashkent in Russian Turkestan, which the Bolsheviks were trying to bring under their control. In order to evade imprisonment and possible execution, Bailey, disguised as an Albanian deserter from the Serbian Army, audaciously enlisted himself in the Soviet Secret Service, remained at large in Turkestan for many months and finally made his way out through Bokhara to Meshed in Persia in January 1920.<sup>2</sup>

After a year in Tibet Auchinleck was moved to command his regiment's other detachment in Sikkim; and in 1908 the battalion was reunited at Benares on the Ganges. This holiest of holy Hindu cities was regarded as a potential danger-spot; the single Indian battalion which composed the garrison there was accordingly 'stiffened', in obedience to contemporary political and military doctrine, by the presence of a company of British infantry. Benares, though Auchinleck found it a pleasant station and on the whole enjoyed himself there, was a far from healthy place. Cholera was rife. In 1911 the C.O. of the battalion, Colonel Drever, died within a few hours of the symptoms first showing themselves. Auchinleck himself, almost as soon as he came down from the hills, had a severe attack of diphtheria, after which he took eight months' home leave—his first in six years. He had some weeks of convalescence at Havant,

<sup>1</sup> One of the civilians, sitting in the driving seat of the motor, was Captain (later Sir Frederick) O'Connor, who was a master of the Tibetan language and had accompanied Younghusband as his interpreter on his Mission in 1904.

<sup>2</sup> The story of this extraordinary adventure is told at length in Colonel Bailey's own book, *Mission to Tashkent*, and in Sir Fitzroy Maclean's *A Person from England*. Sir Fitzroy describes Colonel Bailey as 'a placid, mild-mannered officer in the Indian Political Service'.

and then went with his mother to stay with her sister, Mrs. Beaver, at Amersham.

Many before him had made this discovery, many after him were to find it out for themselves: a leave as extended as this, after six years, was too long. A boy had become a man; the old ties had been broken, the new—and important—ties were with India. There was no opportunity and little inclination to put out fresh roots in home soil. After the first weeks of sentimental excitement, the days were apt to pall. His elder sister was twenty, his younger sixteen; his brother, Tiny, had gone off to Nigeria; his cousin, Hugh Beaver, was eighteen and head of the school at Wellington. They were all beginning to build their own lives. The Edwardian decorum of rural Buckinghamshire, or even the pleasures of a visit to Eyrecourt, had little attraction for a young man who had led a hundred soldiers across the high Himalayan passes and into the heart of Tibet. He was a stranger in the land of his birth, and not until forty years had passed was he to feel anything else.

He was glad to be on the boat going back to India. He was even more pleased, and proud as well, when he rejoined the regiment, to be appointed adjutant. He held this appointment for over three years. He showed himself to be zealous, enthusiastic and efficient. Much of the time was spent in training, not only in barracks but in camp. Auchinleck's especial charge was the recruits who, in those days, did not pass through any depot or regimental centre but went straight from enlistment to their units.

He had another home leave in 1912, and for a month of it had himself attached to his cousin Dan Auchinleck's regiment, the Inniskilling Fusiliers, then stationed at Aldershot. His period of attachment included a week on some large-scale manœuvres in East Anglia. He was impressed by (and long remembered) the futility of attempting realistic training with units at less than half their war strength. The manœuvres seemed to him interesting but, although he had hoped that they would bring him up to date, he was not conscious of having learned much. He also asked permission to be attached to the Spanish Army, then engaged on operations in Morocco. Neither the India Office nor the War Office thought much of this idea.

When Auchinleck gave up the adjutancy in 1912, being then twenty-eight years old and a captain of nine years' seniority, he spent six months as assistant recruiting officer in the Northern Punjab. This was a phase of learning and discovery. He spent days at a time touring the villages of that broad, fertile and (in those years) peaceful countryside. From these villages came the bulk of the regiment's



enlistment; in these villages lived the retired pensioners, proud of their memories and their medals. These men were soldiers by birth and heredity. To them the regiment was a family which they knew themselves privileged to join. An old soldier would register his son for his own regiment as, in England, men put their sons' names down for their own old school. The British officer, in a regiment of this kind, was fully knit into the family. The deeper his knowledge of his men's characters, language, outlook, religion and customs, the more personal the experience he had of them in their homes, the stronger became his sense of brotherhood with them. Auchinleck in these years steeped himself in that knowledge and that experience, naturally and spontaneously, and for no ulterior motive.

His understanding of the Indian soldier, of Indians in general, and of India, was a dominant theme in his life. It was to mould, in unexpected but significant ways, his career and his achievements. Its roots were laid deep in these early years when he was an unknown junior regimental officer. It was something which, then and long afterwards, he took for granted. He shared it, he knew, with many others who served and worked in India. He was a man capable of a considerable degree of subjective introspection; but he was not self-centred. He had a quality of heart, of feeling, which was to prove of questionable value to him at crucial moments in his career, but without which he would not have been the kind of man, and the leader of men, that he was. He liked and sought to understand his fellow-men, not for what he could do with them or get out of them, but for themselves. Was this a virtue or was it a flaw? He could command and inspire; but he was incapable of driving others harder than he drove himself. He could be stern, but he had no streak of ruthlessness in him. He was ambitious, but within limits which his achievements, ironically enough, were far to outrun. The capacity to intrigue, which takes many men—in soldiering as in other careers—to the top, was utterly alien to him. He did not try to mould men or circumstances towards the fulfilment of his personal ambition. He simply followed the path of his duty.

Such was the young officer who by 1914 had soldiered happily enough through eleven years of peace. He was now to be tested in war, of a kind and on a scale for which no text-book and no tactical training exercise, however imaginative, had been an adequate preparation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Baptism of Fire

THE First World War had an effect far more profound than at the time was generally realized upon the development of India towards independent nationhood. The old certainties dissolved, new challenges emerged, new aspirations were sharpened. Admittedly, nationalist sentiment had strengthened greatly in the years that had passed since the Morley-Minto reforms. The appetite of politicians was growing by what it fed on. The liberal, constitutional, evolutionist reformers did not any longer have matters all their own way. There was an active extremist, terrorist movement in Bengal, which spread elsewhere in India and indeed to Indians living in the United Kingdom. Violent passions seethed beneath the bland and splendid façade of the Raj at the apparent zenith of its power.

From these affairs the Army stood aloof, aware only of its strong, traditional and personal loyalties. It was true that the Viceroy, a chilly, talented, self-centred egotist, who was as convinced of the rightness of his own views on military matters as on administration, diplomacy and high policy, asserted that chaos prevailed in the Military Department, and in 1912 he persuaded his home Government to appoint a commission (under the chairmanship of a Field-Marshal) to investigate the military organization and expenditure of the Army in India. It was also true that, when the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Moore O'Creagh, who had been ill for many months, resigned in March 1914, the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, broke the tradition that officers from the Indian and British Services alternated in this post, and in defiance of urgent representations from London appointed General Sir Beauchamp Duff, who had been Kitchener's C.G.S. and had a reputation for great administrative ability.

'Never,' wrote Lord Hardinge many years later, 'was there so great a failure, followed by a most tragic ending.'<sup>1</sup> However, when

<sup>1</sup> Not that Lord Hardinge could see that he himself had any responsibility for the failure and the tragedy. Duff, in his view, was 'the victim of Kitchener's misguided system of the concentration of everything military in the hands of the Commander-in-Chief, which brought about the recall

war broke out in August 1914, there was in India no more comprehension of the grief, the suffering and the loss which were to ensue than there was in Britain; nor was there any foreboding hint of the extent of the ordeal to which the Indian Army was to be subjected, in more than one theatre of war. There was indeed a great surge of enthusiastic affection for Britain and the British connexion. Nationalists of all shades of opinion from the Aga Khan to Mr. Gandhi offered their help in any capacity which the Government might deem necessary. Lord Hardinge, who had only six days' warning of the imminence of war, acted with great energy to give practical expression to this wave of generous enthusiasm.

Immediately after the declaration of war India offered the home Government two complete divisions of infantry and one division of cavalry for service overseas, with one division of infantry in reserve. The offer was promptly accepted. The speed and thoroughness of India's mobilization were notable. The first Indian division to go overseas and take part in a major war embarked at Karachi on 24 August 1914;<sup>1</sup> the second followed a month later. They were ordered to Egypt, Malta and Gibraltar, but the Viceroy protested vigorously and demanded that 'these splendid divisions should be sent to France, pointing out the slur that would be imposed on India by the presence of Algerian and Senegalese troops in the French Army in France, and that the patriotic enthusiasm for the war in India would receive a serious damper if the activities of the Indian divisions were restricted to garrison duties in the Mediterranean'. Hardinge's view was accepted: the Indian divisions went to France, were flung at once into battle, to fill (as Hardinge justly claimed) 'a gap in the British line that could not otherwise have been filled', and to win, by their gallantry, self-sacrifice and devotion to duty, their own meritorious place in the history of World War I.

The 62nd Punjabis were in the reserve division, and a different but no less challenging series of experiences awaited them. When war was declared they were at Cawnpore. Claude Auchinleck, who had celebrated his thirtieth birthday six weeks before, was the junior captain on the regimental list. In eleven years of strenuous and

of Curzon from India in 1905, and which proved to be an impracticable system under the stress of war'. *My Indian Years* by Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, p. 86.

<sup>1</sup> For reasons of policy no Indian Army units had been employed in the South African War. For the Indian Army as a whole, therefore, as for individual officers and men, the war of 1914-18 was of a specially testing character.

useful soldiering he had not yet heard a shot fired in anger; nor had the majority of men in the regiment.

Mobilization was carried out quickly and efficiently. Was there such chaos in the Military Department as Lord Hardinge subsequently alleged? The battalion moved from Cawnpore to Bombay; and at Bombay, on 28 October 1914—exactly one month after the second contingent of Indian troops destined for the Western Front had left Karachi—embarked with a strength of twelve British officers, nineteen Indian officers and 808 other ranks in S.S. *Glenetive* and S.S. *Elysia*. They formed part of the 22nd Indian Infantry Brigade, and their destination, like that of their predecessors, was France.

However, the strategic situation was deteriorating rapidly. The German raiding cruiser *Emden* was at large in the Indian Ocean; the two transports carrying the 62nd Punjabis were in a large convoy of more than forty vessels with a strong naval escort. Before the convoy reached the Suez Canal, Turkey, in spite of the vigorous efforts of intermediaries such as the Aga Khan, had entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. The position in Egypt was delicate and might become critical; the security of the Suez Canal was of the utmost importance to Britain's lines of communication. On 16 November 1914, the convoy anchored off Suez. The 22nd Brigade was ordered, instead of continuing its journey to France, to disembark, move to Ismailia and assume the task of defending the Timsah-Bitter Lake section of the Suez Canal. The C.O. of the 62nd Punjabis, Lieutenant-Colonel Geoghegan, was promoted to command the brigade, and Major E. W. Grimshaw took over the command of the battalion. A number of the British units with whom they had been travelling went straight on to France.

It was thought that the Turks would move out of Syria and Palestine, invade Egypt and seek to straddle the Suez Canal. The plan was to let them advance across the Sinai Desert and hit them hard when they reached the Canal.

The Turks' movements were leisurely, but they conformed with this appreciation. By the last week in January 1915 the 62nd Punjabis were entrenched in strong defensive positions along the west bank of the Canal, between the forty-fifth and forty-ninth of the milestones which mark its length. On January 25, two days after the battalion was in position, there was a brief Turkish raid on Kantara, some miles to the north. Information came in later in the week that the Turks, having dragged pontoons and guns with infinite labour across the then roadless Sinai Desert, were in force on the eastern side of the Canal opposite Ismailia and the battalion's

headquarters at Serapeum West. It was clear that an attack in strength was to be expected at any time.

It came on the night of February 2-3. Captain Auchinleck, with the battalion's two machine-guns, was in a redoubt in a forward, flanking position on the east—or as he later described it 'wrong' or Turkish—side of the Canal, between milestones 49 and 50. At 3.30 a.m. on February 3, in the cool, clouded darkness before the dawn, a sentry about a mile and a half north of this position spotted the Turks launching the first of their pontoons across the Canal and opened fire. Within a few minutes the firing was general all along the front. Captain Auchinleck remembered ducking his head abruptly when he heard the first bullet crack over it. By four o'clock it was clear that the main weight of the Turkish attack was against the positions held by two companies of the 62nd on the west bank of the Canal between milestones 47 and 49.

The battle, which continued intermittently but with vigour throughout February 3 and 4, was Auchinleck's baptism of fire. The battalion as a whole acquitted itself with distinction. At one point the Turks managed to reach the west bank but were quickly and resolutely repulsed; their pontoons were sunk and, by daybreak on the 3rd, a considerable number of enemy dead could be seen lying around the beached boats on the east bank. Shortly after eight o'clock that morning the Turks attacked again, and were again driven back; Captain Auchinleck and his machine-guns went in with the counter-attack and the Turks' forward trenches were cleared.

The following morning they were still in their rear trenches and from these launched yet another attack. A company of the 62nd, moving up from the south, took part in a general counter-attack. Just before they went in with the bayonet, signs of surrender were made, and six officers and two hundred men gave themselves up to the 62nd. The Turkish casualties had been heavy, and the survivors now withdrew. The 62nd had sustained twenty-seven casualties, seven other ranks killed, two British officers and eighteen other ranks wounded. Two British officers were awarded the D.S.O.; an Indian officer, an N.C.O. and a sepoy also received decorations for gallantry. The battalion as a whole had 'behaved admirably with cool determination in the face of fierce attacks and heavy fire'.<sup>1</sup>

Fighting along the Canal died away thereafter to patrol activity, and the Turks made no further attempt to cross it and invade metropolitan Egypt. The 62nd remained on the Canal and were not sent to Gallipoli; their one recorded enterprise in this phase in their

<sup>1</sup> *The First Punjabis* by Maj. M. I. Qureshi, Ch. XIII, p. 170.

war career was to acquire a mascot, a ewe from the Sudan, named Bunty, who stayed with them until 1926.<sup>1</sup>

At short notice in July 1915 the 62nd joined the 28th (Punjab Frontier Force) Brigade and embarked on July 12 for Aden, where a critical situation had developed in the Protectorate. Sheikh Othman, eight miles north of the port and town of Aden, and its chief source of water, fell into Turkish hands. It was essential that it should be recaptured and an assault upon or siege of the colony itself be prevented.

The 28th Brigade drove the Turks out of Sheikh Othman on July 21, and then undertook a series of desultory operations, throughout several hot and humid months, to disperse the enemy and marauding Arab tribesmen from the waterless and barren wastes on the mainland north of the isthmus on which Aden stands. The Turks, at the far end of a long, thin and gravely jeopardized line of communications, made no further serious attempt against Aden. And in December 1916 the 62nd were ordered to the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia, which had by this time developed into a major theatre of war.

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An ill-conceived, over-hasty, over-optimistic attempt to capture Baghdad had followed—or, rather, had been imposed by the politicians in London—upon the limited and successful operation which, launched from India, had taken Basra and given protection to the oilfields and installations in south-west Persia. A sizeable British and Indian force was now besieged in Kut-el-Amara, on a bend in the Tigris about half-way between Basra and Baghdad. Frantic efforts were now being made to relieve this force by a formation known as Tigris Corps, commanded at the time of the arrival of the 62nd Punjabis by Lieutenant-General Sir F. J. Aylmer.

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck paid this tribute to Bunty: 'Her record of twelve years of faithful service in peace and war may be classed as remarkable.' She had been sent to the battalion as an ordinary issue of 'meat on hoof', but the Indian soldier does not eat the female of the species if he can help it, and Bunty was also thought to be pregnant. She was adopted by the machine-gun section under Auchinleck's command, became as tame and obedient as a dog, and followed the machine-gun mules and the regiment wherever they went, in and out of action, throughout World War I. She went back with them to the N.W. Frontier of India in 1920. In Peshawar she disgraced herself and disorganized the march past by halting in front of the saluting base and staring with lively interest at the C.-in-C., Lord Rawlinson, who was taking the salute. At Manzai in Waziristan in 1926 she was pursued and killed by jackals.

The 62nd Punjabis arrived in Mesopotamia with a strength of thirteen British officers, twenty-two Indian officers and 907 other ranks. A month later they had suffered a total of 443 casualties, including six British officers and twelve Indian officers. And this was only a prelude to the ordeal which they had to endure.

As soon as they disembarked at Basra on the last day of the old year they were ordered into a river paddle-steamer and began the voyage up the Tigris. On January 7 they were put ashore at a place called Hissah, a mile or two downstream from Shaikh Saad, where the Turks were entrenched in strong defensive positions, against which General Aylmer was about, that very morning, to launch an attack. The 62nd came off their steamer and its attendant barges straight into the battle area. There was not even time for them to join a higher formation, and for their four days there they were under General Aylmer's direct command. During this time there was no major engagement; the Turks withdrew to new defensive positions in the Hanna defile, and the 62nd went across to the left bank of the river to join the 35th Infantry Brigade. Throughout the 12th and 13th there was heavy fighting, in the course of which the 35th Brigade came up from reserve and went into the line.

On January 12 it began to rain, and thereafter it rained almost incessantly for several weeks. The troops moved—if they could—in a huge quagmire of soft, deep, clinging mud; they had no proper shelter either from the rain or from the icy north-east gale which blew with steady ferocity straight off the snows of the Pusht-i-Kuh mountains. The administrative chaos in Basra meant that they were on reduced rations, and without fuel to make fires to warm and dry themselves. The 62nd were more fortunate than most of their comrades who shivered in khaki drill tropical uniforms, for, by a piece of admirable foresight, every officer and man in the battalion had been equipped with a suit of serge uniform, purchased out of regimental funds before they left Cawnpore in October 1914.

General Aylmer was under severe pressure, both from London and from India, to hasten on his efforts to relieve Kut. On January 14 the 3rd Division arrived in the battle area to reinforce Tigris Corps; the 62nd were ordered on the 16th to join 9th Brigade, which formed part of this Division. Aylmer had decided to advance with all the strength at his disposal on both banks of the river. The corps possessed no pontoons and no proper bridging materials. The engineers had, therefore, with great difficulty and working under terrible conditions, constructed a bridge of boats, composed of the local frail, canoe-like craft known as *bellums*. The 9th Brigade were ordered to cross over to the right bank, but when the 62nd reached

the crossing-place on the afternoon of the 17th, they found that the bridge had been carried away in a strong gale. Throughout the next few days there was no improvement in the weather; the winds roared and the floods mounted, and it was impossible to get the 9th Brigade over into the position allotted to it in the battle plan. It therefore remained on the left bank to participate in the costly frontal attack which was launched against the Turkish positions at Hanna on January 21.

Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson, who some weeks earlier had taken over the post of C.I.G.S. and was then striving to get a grip on the control of the war as a whole, subsequently subjected the Mesopotamian campaign to a ruthlessly detailed analysis. He stated—inaccurately—that the relief operations were suspended on January 21 'because the troops were too exhausted and weak to do any more'.

The truth was that these troops, early on the morning of January 21, went into a major attack, despite the fact that (as Robertson records) they 'had no trench mortars, no heavy howitzers, and but a few light ones, no heavy guns or Very lights and a limited number of machine-guns', despite the fact that their intelligence was inadequate, despite the fact that they were very short of aircraft and had no balloons for the observation of fire, and despite the fact that on that very day there were, in reserve in Basra, 'ten thousand infantry and twelve guns which could not be sent upstream owing to the lack of shipping to keep them supplied on arrival at the front'.<sup>1</sup>

Under these hardly favourable conditions the main attack, as planned by General Aylmer, was to be delivered by 35th Brigade against the Turkish bastion at Hanna, about five hundred yards from the river, and against the small salient work close to the river bank. The 9th Brigade was to support this main attack under the orders of the Divisional Commander. They marched from their bivouacs at 2.30 a.m. in order to get as near the front as possible under cover of darkness. At 5.30 a.m. the 62nd reached the Reserve Trench, where they waited for the artillery bombardment, and then advanced with the rest of their brigade to support the attack which was led by the 35th Brigade. They were dispersed in three lines immediately in the rear of the 35th Brigade; in the first line were the 62nd Punjabis, on the right, and the 1/4th Hampshires; in the second the 1st Connaught Rangers; and in the third the 107th Pioneers. At 7.55 a.m., 35th Brigade advanced under cover of

<sup>1</sup> *Soldiers and Statesmen* by F.M. Sir William Robertson, Vol. II, p. 57.



the bombardment, got forward about two hundred yards, and received a considerable number of casualties under heavy and accurate Turkish fire—so heavy and so accurate that they were forced back to their own front line trenches.

Meanwhile the 9th Brigade were trying to push forward to support the 35th Brigade. The 62nd Punjabis, on the right of the first line, were ordered to advance at about 250 yards from the river bank; the 1/4th Hampshires moved slightly to their left rear. The 62nd went forward in two lines, No. 1 and No. 2 Double Companies in the first line and No. 3 and No. 4 Double Companies in the second line, and with the machine-guns on their left. The area was completely flat and destitute of cover. The moment that they left their trenches the 62nd came under heavy rifle and shrapnel fire, and their casualties were severe. Nevertheless they went on, and by 8.30 a.m. they had reached the firing line, within 250 yards of the Turkish trenches. But the C.O. and the commander of No. 2 Double Company had both been killed.

Forward came the Connaught Rangers in an effort to reinforce the 62nd. But all attempts at a further advance met very heavy machine-gun fire from the Turkish trenches, and the attack failed to make any further progress. At noon it began to rain again; the whole landscape became a sea of mud. Communications broke down. The remnants of the various units of the two brigades were hopelessly intermingled. The order to withdraw was given at 3.30 p.m.; but the 62nd did not get the order until after dark. Some of them rallied in trenches about four hundred yards in front of the original Reserve Trench; No. 3 Double Company did not receive the message until 3.00 a.m., and did not arrive until dawn on the 22nd. The senior surviving officer, Major C. H. B. Wright, assumed command and began to reorganize his stricken battalion. Auchinleck became acting adjutant. Their casualties totalled 372: thirty killed, 327 wounded and fifteen missing.

The two brigades had suffered in all 2,740 casualties. This was only the beginning of their ordeal:

Men lay out all night in pitiless, icy rain, dying from exposure because the medical personnel—heroic in its efforts—was hopelessly inadequate to succour them. In the morning many sepoys were found dead without a mark upon them; others were picked up and were slowly jolted, petrified and sodden with freezing mud, in springless carts to dressing stations which for hours had been nothing better than a shambles. Still later, men arrived at Amara with wounds which for eight days had remained untended—

wounds which were putrefying, gangrenous and full of maggots. Some idea of the condition of the ground may be imagined from the fact that it took an ordinary fit infantryman two and a half hours to walk four miles. The river was brimming over; indeed the small detachment on the right bank was flooded out altogether. . . . On the 22nd General Aylmer was compelled to arrange a truce with the enemy to enable him to collect his wounded.<sup>1</sup>

During this truce the body of Major Skeen, the commander of No. 2 Double Company, was recovered and buried behind the trenches then occupied by the battalion. On the following day the body of the C.O., Colonel Grimshaw, having been stripped naked by marauding Arabs, was found and buried beside that of Major Skeen.

So under strength was the battalion that on January 28, a week after the disastrous attack, Major Wright reorganized it temporarily as two double companies. For a fortnight they remained on entrenching and outpost duties, and on February 14 they rejoined the 36th Brigade, for which they had been destined ever since they sailed from Aden.

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Reorganization was going on at a higher level too. On February 3, at the urgent insistence of General Robertson, the C.I.G.S., the General Staff at the War Office assumed control of the campaign in Mesopotamia. For the first time the commander of these operations, which (said the Viceroy with justifiable acerbity) 'had been regarded as the Cinderella of the campaigns in progress', could look forward to getting his fair share of reinforcements, guns, transport, aircraft and medical supplies. Even so, it was bound to be some time before these arrived, and Kut still had not been relieved. At the beginning of March, in hardly better case than they had been six weeks before, the weary, badly shaken, but indomitable men of the Tigris Corps were launched in a new offensive, for which General Aylmer had been preparing throughout February.

The assault on the Turkish defences on the left bank of the Tigris, at Hanna, had been a costly failure. The plan this time was to try to roll up the Turkish positions on the right bank from their southern end, the Dujaila Redoubt. The 62nd were led by a new C.O., Lieutenant-Colonel H. H. Harrington, who came to them from the

<sup>1</sup> *A Brief Outline of the Campaign in Mesopotamia 1914-1918* by Maj. R. Evans, pp. 60-1.

84th Punjabis. As part of the 36th Brigade, the battalion's allotted task was to attack Turkish trenches some two and a half miles south-west of the main objective, the Redoubt.

For an operation of this character—a direct attack on a formidably held and commanding defensive position—the maximum of concealment and of surprise was essential. Mustering at twilight on the evening of March 7, the 36th Brigade marched silently through the night, and reached its forming-up place within sight of the Redoubt as dawn was breaking. The Turks gave no evidence of being aware of the presence of a large British force on their flank. The Brigade Commander therefore permitted one of his battalions, the 26th Punjabis, to go on advancing before the ordered zero hour of the main attack. The Force Commander, who wished the infantry assault to be combined with the artillery bombardment, ordered them back. All the advantage of the element of surprise was thus thrown away. Time passed—it was not until 8.45 a.m. that the battle began—the Turks were alerted and had manned their trenches in great strength.

The bombardment went on for an hour; then at 9.45 a.m. the infantry were ordered to advance. The 62nd, still severely under strength, supplied one double company as an escort to the guns of the 8th Field Battery. The machine-guns of all the battalions were brigaded and moved on the left flank of the advancing troops. 36th Brigade had fulfilled its allotted task by 11.30; but the brigades to the east of them, much nearer to the Redoubt itself, were meeting very stiff resistance. At noon the order came to the 36th to move over to their support; two hours later they formed up afresh facing the Redoubt and began to advance across the barren and treeless depression under the enemy's artillery, machine-guns and rifles.

Before dusk fell they had given of their best to no avail. Short, sharp rushes across the plain had taken them to within two hundred yards of the enemy trenches, but no further. They were well trained, well disciplined and well led; their own staunchness and steadiness were beyond praise. Like his predecessor at Hanna, Colonel Harrington was hit and fell as he led his men in the attack. A devoted havildar crawled across the fire-swept field to give him aid. After over two hours of this useless slaughter, Captain Auchinleck took over command of the survivors and rallied them in the rear of the firing line. The 82nd Punjabis, who had been the 62nd's brothers-in-arms since the days of the Mysore and Mahratta Wars, made one more desperate bid to reach the Turkish trenches, and sustained the heaviest casualties of any unit in the 36th Brigade.

This, too, was in vain; and after nightfall Auchinleck brought his

men to join No. 2 Double Company under Major Wright who, as at Hanna six weeks earlier, had once again to assume command of the stricken battalion. At midnight General Aylmer ordered a withdrawal to Ora, on the river bank about a couple of miles below Hanna.

Exhausted, thirsty, without kit or blankets, shelled by the enemy all the way, but in good order, the men arrived in their bivouacs half a mile north of the Tigris at 11 a.m. on the 9th. They had had no sleep since 6.30 p.m. on the 7th.<sup>1</sup>

A roll-call showed that their strength was reduced to eight British officers, four Indian officers and 235 other ranks. They were reorganized into two companies of two platoons each, and a machine-gun section with two guns.

The second major attempt to relieve Kut had failed; once again as in January there was a background of hasty and unimaginative planning and administrative incompetence.

'At Basrah,' General Robertson commented acidly, 'there were some twelve thousand infantry, twenty-six guns, and a large amount of animal transport (urgently needed at the front) which could not be sent up in time for the operation.'<sup>2</sup>

General Aylmer was dismissed, and was succeeded on March 11 by Lieutenant-General Sir George Goringe. It had been thought that the garrison in Kut had had supplies only to last them into February; but the weeks passed and they still held out. Therefore in April Goringe made another series of attempts to relieve them. His force had a strength of thirty thousand rifles and 127 guns as compared with the twenty-four thousand rifles and ninety-two guns which Aylmer had mustered in March. Even so, as Robertson did not hesitate to point out, Goringe was short of some three thousand rifles, thirty-two guns and a great deal of road transport, because there was still not enough river transport to get them there in time.

Four times—on April 5, 6, 9 and 22—General Goringe hammered away at the Turkish defences. More lives were lost, more effort and courage and skill dissipated. The 62nd bore their share of two of these efforts. The rains continued; the marshlands were flooded again; the river ran in a sullen, red-brown spate; and still the Turks barred the way to Kut. On St. George's Day the C.I.G.S. in London came to the conclusion that the troops had reached the limit of their offensive powers, and he sent a telegram urging that

<sup>1</sup> *The First Punjabis* by Maj. M. I. Qureshi, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Soldiers and Statesmen* by F.M. Sir William Robertson, Vol. II, p. 61.

negotiations be opened to prevent the Kut garrison from perishing of starvation. On that same day Gorringer gave up hope of success, and Townshend, in Kut, asked whether he should open negotiations.

Two days later Kut surrendered. The effort to raise its siege had cost the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force 23,500 casualties, of which the 62nd's share was 560. Their gallantry and determination under most trying conditions were specially commended by the commander of the Tigris Corps.

Years afterwards Auchinleck summed up the condition of his regiment that April, as by mutual consent the fighting died away, and Turks and British alike went into summer quarters: 'Exhausted, decimated and with our morale badly shaken.'

The unsuccessful advance towards Baghdad, the defeat at and retreat from Ctesiphon, the siege of Kut, and the long, costly and fruitless efforts to raise the siege, together constitute one of the most sheerly tragic episodes in the whole history of World War I. To an officer of Auchinleck's outlook, experience and capacity, it taught a number of grim but unforgettable lessons.

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The early months of that long, torrid summer of 1916 were, for the tired, battered troops in Iraq, extremely disagreeable. After Kut surrendered the Turks withdrew from their forward positions; trenches, in vain assaults on which the British and the Indians had spent so much valour and so much blood, were now theirs merely for the effort of walking into them. It was not unironic that the 62nd for most of the summer occupied the Dujaila Redoubt. They dug and remade trenches, they filled in old Turkish trenches, they made roads, they patrolled no-man's-land. And they fell ill. There was cholera, there was dysentery, and there was scurvy. In one month alone, August, the battalion's sick-roll was 194.

There were no buildings for the troops and in the tents and bivouacs the heat was intense, generally 120°F. in the shade by day. There were clouds of dust and myriads of flies. Rations were very short and fresh meat and vegetables were unobtainable. There were not even potatoes to be had, as those sent from India sprouted in the intense heat on the voyage up the Persian Gulf and became uneatable. Such luxuries as ice, soda-water and cigarettes were unheard of.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The First Punjabis* by Maj. M. I. Qureshi, p. 183.

Throughout this unpleasant period Auchinleck's physique and stamina stood him in good stead. He escaped all the diseases which were rife. In the middle of June he had ten days' 'leave' at Amara, a hundred miles downstream, which he spent in a hut in a hospital compound, resting, eating (the rations were a little better and more varied than they were in the forward areas), sleeping and swimming. One of the many distressing aspects of the Mesopotamian campaign was the complete lack of amenities, including rest camps and leave areas. Auchinleck was therefore fortunate in having a month's real—and thoroughly earned—leave in India in August. He went by sea to Karachi and then on to Simla, where he had never been before. In the last weeks of the monsoon, Simla was cool and rainy and wrapped in mist; but there were trees and grass and flowers and the great hills to relax mind and eyes wearied by months of Mesopotamian flatness and aridity. There was, too, the welcome companionship of his cousin, Hugh Beaver, then an officer in the Indian Police.

When Auchinleck rejoined his battalion the whole atmosphere in Mesopotamia had changed. General Sir Frederick Maude, an able, intelligent and clear-sighted soldier, had been appointed Commander-in-Chief. Both the C.I.G.S. and the new Commander-in-Chief in India, General Monro, kept a vigilant watch not only over the conduct of operations, but on all the administrative arrangements in the rear. Reinforcements were arriving in large numbers from India—the Punjabi war-effort was by no means exhausted—rations were improved, there were guns, there were aircraft, there were fresh supplies of equipment and ammunition, training was in full swing, morale was up. In Auchinleck's own words, 'the Army was alive again'.

The 62nd had a new C.O., Lieutenant-Colonel G. M. Morris, and were up to strength. They were still in 36th Brigade, which now formed part of the 14th Division. This division took a notable part in the general assault on Kut-el-Amara, still, after all this time and outpouring of effort, barring the way to Baghdad, whose capture (after a good deal of discussion between London, India and G.H.Q. in Mesopotamia) remained the chief objective of the campaign. The Turks were clearly determined to hold Kut in strength, though they had withdrawn from the forward position, which had so long and so disastrously held up Aylmer and Goringe in the previous winter.

General Maude had ideas ranging beyond the bleak sterilities of linear warfare. Kut-el-Amara stood just above the junction of the Tigris and its tributary, the Shatt el Hai, which came in at a sharp

angle from the south-west. The town proper was on the left bank of the Tigris, but it had sprawled out in some rather unsavoury suburbs—a bazaar and a liquorice factory—on the right bank and along the Hai. The whole area formed a salient in which the Turks had prepared a large and elaborate network of trenches. General Maude's initial attack, headed by the 13th British Division, opened in mid-December, and was quickly bogged down in slow trench warfare, with the troops moving step by step from one limited objective to another. This, though it was the familiar pattern of war on the Western Front, had no appeal for Maude. If he slogged, he slogged with a purpose beyond that of bludgeoning both sides into ineffectiveness; the formations under his command, though their casualties were heavy (in some instances a good deal heavier than in the earlier campaign), knew that they were not being wasted through sheer stupidity and inefficiency.

This was a lesson in soldiering which was not lost on Auchinleck. In all, the trench warfare phase in the Hai salient lasted some six weeks. By the end of January, although three lines of the Turks' defences on the west of the Shatt el Hai had been captured, a further network stretched back, as far as the eye could see, to the Tigris. Maude opened his main assault on February 1. Neither he nor the enemy had the weight of artillery fire which, by this time, had become habitual in France; but machine-gun and rifle fire was, throughout the operation, extremely heavy and accurate. The advancing troops fought their way steadily from trench to trench. On the night of February 2 the 62nd lost their M.O., Lieutenant C. Stibel, I.M.S., who had volunteered to go to the help of the wounded in the most advanced sectors. On the following day, in a series of attacks across open ground under heavy fire, one company commander was killed and two were severely wounded.

By the end of February 3 a good deal more ground had been taken, and the various battalions in the front line were very much intermingled. Colonel Morris, therefore, took over the command of all the troops in the captured trenches. When day broke on February 4, the Turks had been cleared from the whole of the west bank of the Hai, except the liquorice factory which stood on the tip of land where the two rivers met. The Turkish casualties were heavy, and in their retreat they abandoned many of their rifles, much ammunition and much equipment. During the three days of hard fighting the 62nd had had 193 casualties, including two British officers killed and three wounded. In spite of these heavy losses the battalion asked to be allowed to carry on, and on February 4 received a complimentary signal from the Army Commander:

How much I admire not only your excellent work yesterday but also the splendid spirit which has prompted you to ask to be allowed to carry on instead of being relieved.

On February 8 Colonel Morris temporarily assumed command of the 36th Brigade, and Auchinleck took over command of the battalion. Two days later the last Turkish strongholds on the west bank of the river—the bazaar and the liquorice factory—were attacked and taken by the 62nd. Round both the positions they found, still standing in good condition, a high breastwork which was a mute memorial to the gallant but ill-fated men of the 6th Division, who had defended them a year before.

Now at last the smell of victory was in the air. On February 23-4 the advancing troops crossed the Tigris at the Shumran bend above Kut-el-Amara. The 62nd, with Auchinleck still in command, played a notable part in a swift and successful operation of a classic character. The river was wide and rapid and swung round in a large U-bend; and the Turks were in position in an old, dry water channel some 2,500 yards from the river bank. On the morning of February 23 the 1/9th Gurkhas were ferried across in boats, and dug themselves into individual foxholes; throughout the day they maintained covering fire while the engineers built, at great speed, a pontoon bridge capable of carrying artillery. The 'forlorn hope' for once came off; and by half past four, well before dusk, the bridge was ready. At nightfall Auchinleck led the 62nd across, to relieve the Gurkhas. So shallow were the hillmen's foxholes that the Punjabis were under cover only from their knees downwards. They had to sit to dig; and dig they did throughout the night. In the morning they were given the order to attack the Turkish positions across the base of the loop in the Tigris.

They went forward as the directing battalion in a two-brigade advance. It was a long trudge of more than a mile, and they did it without halting to shoot, but under a steady hail of Turkish machine-gun fire. The battalion on their right—the 82nd Punjabis, their companions at the Dujaila Redoubt a year before—suffered very heavily, losing half their complement and being left with only two British and three Indian officers instead of eight and fifteen. The 62nd's casualties were less severe: eight killed and fifty-eight wounded, perhaps, said Auchinleck, 'because our formation was looser and less rigid—maybe just fate'.

Neither regiment had faltered; 'but,' Auchinleck added, 'it was a frightening experience, and I was glad when we got into the Turkish trenches to find them empty. It was a fine test of discipline,



steadiness and courage, and the troops were much better than they had been a year before at Hanna.'

By nine o'clock in the morning the 36th Brigade had taken many prisoners and had seized Dahra ridge, a line of sandhills stretching across the top of the U-loop. There was heavy fighting for the rest of the day in a maze of canals and deep water cuts below the ridge; but by nightfall all Turkish resistance in the Shumran peninsula had ceased. The 62nd captured two field guns whose Austrian and German crews had abandoned them and fled. These were brought in after dark, and one of them was placed in front of the Quarter Guard of the First Punjabis' Regimental Centre at Jhelum in Pakistan.

Of this little-known battle Sir William Robertson, who was not an easy man to please, wrote: 'The operations were skilfully planned, were carried out in complete accord with the spirit of the General Staff instructions under which Maude was acting, and may be regarded as a masterpiece of tactics in fighting astride a formidable river.'<sup>1</sup>

On the following day, February 25, the Turks were in full retreat. For Auchinleck, still in command of his battalion, it was a matter of 'little fighting, long marches, no baths, plenty of lice but a good spirit'. There was a brief check on the Diala river to the east of Baghdad; the 62nd's not especially satisfying task was to carry out a feint crossing (which everyone knew to be a feint) ten miles up river. On 11 March 1917, Baghdad was occupied without opposition. For the troops this was indeed the promised land. On March 13 the 62nd marched into the city, and Colonel Morris resumed command. They were lodged in the old Turkish 'Clock Tower' barracks. Though the barracks were filthy when the Punjabis took them over, they seemed—to men who had not had a roof over their heads for a twelvemonth and had hardly even seen a tent—like a first-class hotel. After a few days, as the city settled down, the troops were allowed to explore it, and go and shop in the bazaars. Victory had its sweets. In June they moved forty miles up the Diala river to Baquba, an agreeable and fertile spot, famous for its grapes (fourpence a bucketful, Auchinleck recorded happily). The Iraqi summer was on them again, but a great deal more pleasantly than in the preceding year. They were employed in digging a divisional defensive system. They dug from four to eight o'clock in the morning, stayed in their tents until the evening, then carried out parades and training and went swimming in the river. The nights were

<sup>1</sup> *Soldiers and Statesmen* by F.M. Sir William Robertson, Vol. II, p. 75.

fairly cool, and sandflies were the only nuisance worth mentioning.

Auchinleck by this time had been noticed as an officer of promise and meritorious achievement, to be singled out for promotion. At the summer's end, some months after his thirty-third birthday, he went somewhat reluctantly, for he was far from anxious to leave his regiment, as brigade major to the 52nd Brigade, which was part of the new 17th Indian Division, stationed near Baghdad. But inevitably the work—chiefly the training of the new drafts fresh from India—aroused his interest and enthusiasm. When training was completed, the brigade was engaged on internal security duties in the 'holy' towns of Najaf and Hilla, where there was a good deal of unrest. At the end of February 1918 it moved to Daur and Tikrit, on the Tigris above Baghdad. By this time almost the whole of the great alluvial plain of the land of the two rivers was in British hands, and the Turks had withdrawn to hold the gorge at Al Fatha, guarding the approaches to Mosul and Kirkuk. There was, however, a prolonged stalemate, for the Turks were in no shape to take the offensive, and the British lacked the transport to enable them to continue their advance. There was no fighting, therefore, and the brigade went into summer quarters. Auchinleck took another leave, this time in Ceylon to stay with his sister Cherry, now married to a tea-planter living in the beautiful hill-country below Nuwara Eliya.

He returned to Iraq in time for the final advance up into the mountains of Kurdistan. By the autumn the end of the war was in sight. In Palestine and Syria, Allenby was rolling up the last Turkish resistance in his swift advance after the battle of Megiddo. On 2 November 1918, Turkey sued for an armistice, nine days before the Germans on the Western Front.

In this distant and turbulent arena, where communications were still few and primitive, there was not an immediate and spectacular end to the long and arduous campaigns. The tempo changed, but the machine remained in gear for many months—well-nigh years—after the formal cessation of hostilities.

Soon after the Armistice, Auchinleck found himself a G.S.O.2 with the division garrisoning Mosul. After several happy and peaceful months there, enjoying the beauty of the rolling and flower-decked hillsides, the rushing streams and the friendliness of the people, he was appointed, in August 1919, G.S.O.1 of a division ordered to pacify Kurdistan, where the landscape was just as beautiful, but the people, since they refused to acknowledge the new (Arab) rulership of their country, a good deal less friendly. From May to August the division were engaged in suppressing a quite large-scale rising in and around Sulaimaniyah. The Commander of

the division, an austere but likeable sapper and an excellent leader of men, was General 'Snowball' Fraser. Auchinleck himself, since his juniors were young and inexperienced, took on the bulk of the staff work and revelled in it. In later years he recalled it as 'a wonderful experience'. The tangible recognition of his work was that he was mentioned in despatches<sup>1</sup> and made a brevet lieutenant-colonel.

Before the end of 1919 he was offered a vacancy at the Staff College at Quetta. He was in something of a dilemma. At thirty-five, he knew that if he refused the vacancy, the chance would be unlikely to come his way a second time. He was ambitious and intelligent, and his knowledge of his own capabilities had tautened in the testing years of the war. The Staff College was the main recognized gateway to advancement in his profession; but seven years had passed since his last home leave and the last time he had seen his mother. After not a little heart-searching he decided that the chance was not to be missed. He chose Quetta, and in the event, so far as his private life was concerned, he was justified in his choice. His mother lived on until 1937, and he was able to be in her company several times in the intervening years, and to rejoice in her undaunted spirit, her affection and her undoubted pride in him and his career.

So far as his professional life was concerned, it is questionable whether the choice was, in the final resort, quite as wise. He was outstanding among the younger officers of the Indian Army who had survived the war. The Staff College is always the crucial phase of any regular officer's career. Quetta, immediately after the end of the war, was a cheerful and amiable place, where he made more than one good friend; but—like many other places of higher learning, not excluding the universities—Quetta at the end of 1919 was more than a little higger-mugger and harum-scarum. There was a rich welter of soldiering experience among both instructors and students; some of the students, including Auchinleck, were older, both in years and knowledge of war, than some of the instructors. But they were an extremely mixed lot: not a few of them, as it proved, were obviously unsuitable, and only a small percentage ever rose to—and held—higher rank when the year's course was over. The instruction (this was probably inevitable) was based stolidly on the 'lessons' learned in the years 1914-18, and learned

<sup>1</sup> The wording of Gen. Fraser's commendation was: 'I wish to mention specially Major Auchinleck, D.S.O., O.B.E., my Chief Staff Officer, who has borne the whole burden of the "G" work on his own back, and has proved himself a tower of strength. He has been most helpful to all my units as well as to myself, and the success of the operations is largely due to his vigorous personality, to his suggestive mind and to his professional ability.'

principally on the Western Front. Trench warfare therefore loomed large; there were vast intricate schemes based on the experience of a massively static war; there was a great deal about trench warfare and its ponderous, slow logistics—all, in Auchinleck's view, very different (apart from the dour weeks in the Hai Salient) from his own war, which had been, in its successful phases, relatively mobile, with open flanks and cavalry movements.

It is true that similar doctrines—grievously mistaken as they proved to be—were incessantly preached at Camberley throughout the whole of the following decade; and it is arguable that had Auchinleck, like some of his most imaginative and intelligent subordinate commanders and staff officers in World War II, gone to Camberley instead of Quetta, he too might have been labelled, as they were, 'rebellious' and 'unsuitable for higher command'. But what he lost, by choosing Quetta in the aftermath of war instead of (as would in all probability have come his way in the nineteen-twenties) Camberley, was the close and continual company of his own contemporaries, of equivalent seniority and roughly equal intellectual calibre, in the British Army. It was a loss whose effects would not trouble him for many years to come; but it meant that he did not encounter British ideas and British influence, in the spheres where power is wielded and policy is moulded, while he was still comparatively young. This would not have been of much importance in lesser fields of authority, but to a Commander-in-Chief or a Supreme Commander, at the highest level of politico-strategic responsibility, it could be a considerable disadvantage.

At the end of his twelve months at the Staff College, Auchinleck went home on leave for the first time since 1912. He was thirty-six years old, he had a brevet and a row of decorations. In his years overseas there had been no opportunity to spend his pay: his savings had piled up in his bank account. He was able to take a year's leave, and to give his mother and his younger unmarried sister, Ruth, a winter holiday at Hyères in the south of France.

Also wintering at Hyères was Mrs. Alexander Stewart, with her young daughter Jessie. Mrs. Stewart was a Scotswoman, born a Douglas, the widow of Alexander Stewart, Laird of Innerhadden, in Kinloch Rannoch. Alexander Stewart was a civil engineer who had worked first in Shanghai for some years, then on the Pacific coast of the United States, at Seattle and Tacoma. His children were brought up as Americans, but he had always staunchly thought of himself as a Scot. When he died, his body was taken home to be buried in Scottish earth. His widow, with her children, settled at Kinloch Rannoch.

Claude Auchinleck fell swiftly and deeply in love with Jessie Stewart. His previous acquaintanceship with young women was remote, formal and shy; and he was newly back in the ordinary, peace-time world after years on active service. As one of the most promising officers of his generation, decorated for gallantry, singled out for promotion, handsome, charming, courteous and kind, he had much to offer her. She was a beauty, of classically Scottish colouring, with dark hair and very shining blue eyes; in her voice was an American intonation very pleasing to the ear; she was gay and high-spirited and fearless, and just twenty-one years old.

They were married in London, just before the end of his leave, and sailed almost immediately for India. A brevet lieutenant-colonel, he was due to take up a major's appointment at Army H.Q. at Simla

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Steadily up the Ladder

AUCHINLECK's posting was that of D.A.Q.M.G. The Q.M.G. was General Sir George MacMunn, an agreeable chief, a perceptive and intelligent man, who quickly discerned Auchinleck's qualities. He was by no means an unoriginal or uninteresting character himself. He was a British Service officer—a gunner—but he had acquired considerable learning about India and the Indian soldier, and was a recognized authority on the history of the British Raj in India. Auchinleck's subsequent summing-up of his former chief's array of knowledge was 'inaccurate perhaps at times but enthralling'.

His time at Simla was enjoyable. Even when snowed up in winter it was a lively, sociable little station. Auchinleck liked his chief, liked his occasional tours in his company, liked the treks up into the big hills towards Tibet. In 1923 there came to Simla from the Staff College at Quetta, also as D.A.Q.M.G., also with a young and pretty wife whom he had met and married at the end of a long post-war leave, a cavalryman named Hastings Ismay. The four of them became and remained close friends. Their lives and their careers were to cross and recross, in a variety of circumstances, again and again in the next quarter of a century.

After four years on the Staff, Auchinleck returned to his regiment, now stationed at Peshawar. His last visit to the frontier capital had been in 1913, when he had passed his examination in Pushtu.

The regiment now bore a new name and number. In 1922—just two decades after the Kitchener reforms—there had been carried out another major reorganization of the Indian Army as a whole. The 62nd Punjabis had been renamed the 1st Battalion of the 1st Punjab Regiment, which contained four other active and one training battalions, more than one of whom were old comrades-in-arms of the 62nd—for example the 82nd, who had been at their side not only in long-ago wars, but at the Dujaila Redoubt and at the crossing of the Tigris. The 62nd now and henceforth until the end of the British Raj bore the proud title 1st/1st.

Soon after Auchinleck rejoined the regiment it moved out ten

miles from Peshawar to Jamrud, the fort at the entrance to the Khyber, and while there took part in the ceremonial opening of the newly-built Khyber Railway, which ran from Jamrud to Landi Kotal. If there was one corner of the earth's surface which Claude Auchinleck truly called home, to which he gave his heart, it was the Peshawar Vale. He knew it in troubled times and in peace, and he went back to it again and again, like a boy let out of school—to the green and fertile plain watered by many streams, to the hills that stand sentinel all around, and to the great, glittering, snowbound peaks beyond. If he loved the landscape, he also—like the vast majority of those of his race who lived and worked on the North-West Frontier—loved the people. There is, Sir Olaf Caroe has written,

... a strange fascination in living among the Pathans. . . . For the stranger who had eyes to see and ears to hear, always as he drove through the Margalla Pass just north of Rawalpindi and went on to cross the great bridge at Attock, there was a lifting of the heart and a knowledge that, however hard the task and beset with danger, here was a people who looked him in the face and made him feel he had come home.<sup>1</sup>

More than thirty years earlier, a sensitive and intelligent visitor to the Frontier tried to analyse its spell. He wrote:

The life of a frontiersman is hard, and he treads it daily on the brink of eternity. Yet, despite its obvious drawbacks, the fact remains that these endless ranges of rugged rocks rising from lower levels do possess the power of inspiring in those whose lot is cast among them an extraordinary enthusiasm. . . . I do not suggest that the average warden of the marches habitually subjects his feelings to this kind of analysis, but the circumstances of his life are such that he frequently experiences a species of spiritual exaltation by solitude amid the grandeur of nature, and such experience is one of the factors that go to make the magic of the Frontier.<sup>2</sup>

In the middle nineteen-twenties the Frontier was, comparatively speaking, at peace—in striking contrast with much of the rest of India, where the twin fires of nationalism and communalism were already kindled. By a firm tradition, resolutely observed, the Indian

<sup>1</sup> *The Pathans* by Sir Olaf Caroe, p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *India, A Bird's-Eye View* by the Marquess of Zetland, pp. 40-1.

Army, from the time that it was first constituted to the moment of its dissolution, was completely aloof from politics. This gave it a moral strength altogether apart from the physical force which it could deploy; and in its passing this was to be its richest legacy to the succession states. This is not to say that, as the era of political and constitutional change came upon India, the Army and many individual officers and men in it were unaware of what was happening. But they trained themselves to keep their own counsel, and never to take sides.

The tumult of a politically awakened India, however, dwindled markedly when set against the perpetual problems and difficulties, the dangers, the glories and the joys of the Frontier; and conversely what seemed, in terms of the Frontier, an extremely relaxed and peaceful atmosphere for soldier and tribesman alike, could give to a visitor from elsewhere a very different impression. In March 1926, for example, the 1st/1st did a little routine duty when they joined the Razmak Column on a double journey of over ninety miles each way, from Razmak to Wana and back, through the heart of the turbulent Mahsud country, in order to keep the peace between the Wazirs and the Mahsuds who were at loggerheads over a disputed boundary.

While he was at Peshawar, Auchinleck had a period away from regimental duty, as G.S.O.2 to General Cassels, who was then commanding the District. In this capacity he was on the directing staff of a big and realistic series of manoeuvres round Attock on the Indus. His own comment on this experience was, 'very instructive'.

His friendship with Sir Robert Cassels was close and durable. They met first when the 62nd were fighting in the trenches of the Hai Salient before the capture of Kut in 1917; the battalion formed part of the 14th Division, of which Cassels was then G.S.O.1. He knew him later as a cavalry brigadier, and he regarded him as a remarkable soldier and a great leader, with many of Rommel's characteristics, who could indeed have been an Allenby—and more—if he had had the chance. In 1941 Auchinleck succeeded Cassels as Commander-in-Chief in India.

At the end of 1926 the Auchinlecks, five years married and five years overseas, took their first long leave at home, and spent it mainly in Scotland and in Devonshire. In 1927 Auchinleck, who by this time was recognized to be one of the outstanding Indian Army officers of his generation, was posted, with one other—Colonel (later General Sir Eric) de Burgh, a cavalryman—to the Imperial Defence College in its opening term.

The I.D.C. was to become one of the most important of British



twentieth-century politico-military devices, invaluable as a gateway to high command in all three Services, and in the Civil Service departments associated with defence, both in the United Kingdom and in the Commonwealth. In 1927 it was inevitably in an experimental and exploratory phase. Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond was its first Commandant, and General (later Field-Marshal Sir John) Dill its Chief Instructor. In its first batch of students there was a remarkable number of men who, a decade and a half later, in World War II, were to hold some of the highest commands, including Admiral of the Fleet Lord Tovey, Admiral Sir Henry Moore, Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, General Sir Robert Haining, General Sir Clive Liddell, General Andrew McNaughton from Canada, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, Air Chief Marshal Sir Philip Joubert de la Ferté (who was the R.A.F. Instructor at the I.D.C. from 1927 to 1929), and Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse.

General de Burgh said that association at the I.D.C. with officers of the other Services and from the Dominions inculcated the spirit of co-operation and the habit of 'thinking big' which was to stand them all in good stead later. There was another, slightly less definable, merit in the experience: they all met and, for a year, worked and studied alongside men with whom subsequently they were to share the most arduous responsibility; and they grew to know each other's temperament, outlook and quality of mind. To Auchinleck perhaps its most valuable aspect was the friendship which he made with Dill, a soldier of the greatest ability, a wise, humane and courageous man, who died untimely in the middle of World War II, to whose achievements and talents full justice has not yet been done.

From the I.D.C. Auchinleck went back, in the following year, to regimental duty with the 1st/1st at Jhelum, then and after partition the regimental centre. In the late nineteen-twenties it was a small station, very old-fashioned in many ways, pleasant enough to serve in, though very hot in summer. In the clear, keen air of winter the snows on the great mountains of Kashmir were visible day after day. There were in training at Jhelum three Indian battalions and a British battalion from Rawalpindi. There was excellent training country around, diverse enough to offer terrain suitable for both frontier fighting and conventional warfare. At the end of 1928 Auchinleck, then aged forty-four, was appointed to command his own battalion. For any soldier this is one of the key moments in his life. To Auchinleck, a man of deep and strong emotions, by far the greater part of whose career had been spent with the regiment, who had indeed grown up in and with it, the moment had a special

significance. He succeeded Lieutenant-Colonel G. E. C. Underhill, who had been his brother-officer for many years, with whom (both as captains) he had gone overseas in 1914 to service on the Suez Canal, at Aden and in Mesopotamia.

He had two magnificent years. One quality which emerged again and again in Auchinleck's life, through every triumph and every adversity, was his zest for living. It showed in his unflinching positive reaction to every new experience which offered itself, in a joy in work and a capacity for turning work into fun, which communicated itself infectiously to those around him. He was to know, in full measure, grief, loss, disappointment, fear and loneliness; but he could never be put down by these vicissitudes, sustained as he was by this inner weather in his soul.

Now he had his own regiment to train and mould as he wished. His officers were excellent. He took his summer leave in Kashmir, in those days not an international problem but merely a holiday country—meadow and woodland, streams, lakes, mountains—of incomparable beauty. He was sent, in one hot weather, to Murree, the hill station between Rawalpindi and Kashmir, to run a class for officers of the 'Services' trying to pass their examinations for promotion. He discovered his own flair for teaching: he made a floor model out of a tarpaulin and put in the hill ranges with stones, and a tactical exercise came suddenly and excitingly to life.

By an odd irony, a soldier's life in India in these years, in contrast with that of a political officer or a senior Civil Servant, was peaceful and well ordered. But this India, in which Auchinleck got on happily with his job, was also the India in which Gandhi was at the zenith of his influence, in which there were *hartals* and communal disturbances, *lathi* charges by the police and the brooding menace of greater violence, the India of Lord Irwin's Viceroyalty and the Simon Commission.

In February 1930 Auchinleck was ordered to Quetta, as G.S.O. 1 at the Staff College, with the rank of full colonel. Ten years had passed since he himself had been a student there immediately after the First World War. Now the course ran for two years, and his chief responsibility was to be in charge of the Junior Division, which consisted of thirty officers in their first year.

The parting with his own regiment was a grievous wrench. Eighteen out of his twenty-seven years of service had been spent in regimental duty, in war and peace. This was his family in which he had grown up; he would return to it again and again, but henceforth always, to some extent, from outside. His pride in it and his love for it were intense and enduring. As was traditional in the

Indian Army, he was given a full send-off—both ceremonial and informally affectionate—by the whole battalion. By the time the last salute had been made it had become almost too much for him. As the train pulled out from the station he was not ashamed to weep.

Quetta, both physically and intellectually, opened up wider horizons. He worked harder than he ever had in his life before. The whole tactical training system, which had ossified into a ritual, overlaid and encrusted with tradition, whereby throughout the year there was a succession of totally disconnected exercises, for each of which a new 'war' had to be invented, was radically reorganized; and there was substituted for it a linked series of exercises, each following naturally on the other in the course of a campaign, all based on one 'general idea'—one 'war'—thereby ensuring continuity of thought. The perennial Indian issue of frontier warfare, which at Quetta was far from academic, was dealt with separately. Auchinleck was absorbed in his work, not only the sheerly military side, but the business of enforcing simplicity and clarity in thought and brevity in writing, and the more intangible task of learning to know each student-officer, his capabilities and his limitations. One of his students, who subsequently rose to high rank and onerous responsibilities, said, 'He was by far the best teacher I have ever known.' Auchinleck characteristically discovered that he was learning far more than he taught.

For relaxation he turned not to games or the social life of which there was a plenitude at Quetta in peace time, but to supervision of his garden (it was small, but so long as it could be watered it could produce grapes, walnuts, apricots, cherries, almonds and peaches) and to the long walks which were to become habitual to him for the rest of his life. The capacity quietly and courteously to disregard conventions which seemed to him meaningless, boring or time-wasting, in a society which set great store by convention, now began to display itself in him.

He was at Quetta until the autumn of 1932.<sup>1</sup> He then had home leave, and returned to India in the spring of the following year to take command of the Peshawar Brigade, which—in his view and in that of many others—was one of the plum appointments of the Army in India. The brigade's complement was four Indian infantry battalions and one British, a cavalry regiment, three Royal Artillery batteries, engineers, signallers, etc. The cantonment was a big one, but the troops were always on semi-active service, with outlying

<sup>1</sup> Eighteen months afterwards, in 1934, there followed him as G.S.O.1 at the Staff College, Col. Bernard Montgomery.

posts along the Afridi border to the south of the Khyber. Within six months of Auchinleck taking up his command, the brigade was out on an operation—a short punitive expedition against the Mohmands. This large and turbulent tribe, inhabiting a barren and precipitous range of hills to the north of Peshawar, through which cuts the frontier between Afghanistan and what was then India and is now Pakistan, had a fighting strength of about fifteen thousand. Four thousand of these lived in the Peshawar district, as tenants of the local *khans*, but claimed dual domicile because they moved annually to the hills to escape the summer heat; when they were on the Indian side of the border they came nominally under the control of the Deputy Commissioner of Peshawar. Their Afghan fellow-tribesmen, described by an eminent authority as ‘a truculent crowd, inflammable material for the fanatical mullah’,<sup>1</sup> were constantly spoiling for a fight and made a habit of stirring up trouble in the British sphere of influence.

In 1933 the trouble was of comparatively brief duration. The brigade mobilized, spent a month trekking and climbing the bare steep hillsides, and had little fighting. It was the height of summer and the heat was formidable, but the expedition gave Auchinleck a chance to get his brigade in to fighting shape. In September they were back to a full five months of hard training around Peshawar itself. The Brigade Commander’s house was an old bungalow, the main structure of which dated back to the years before the Mutiny, when Herbert Edwards, one of the paladins of the British Raj, ruled in Peshawar. It was a well-designed bungalow in mud-brick, white-washed, with fanlight windows and cool verandas. Across the road, of the same vintage and surrounded by a splendid garden with wide lawns shaded by great banyan trees, was the Deputy Commissioner’s house, on the wall of which there was a marble tablet recording that here both Edwards and John Nicholson had lived.<sup>2</sup>

In 1934 Auchinleck took two months’ leave in Kashmir, a fortnight of which he spent on a long trek in the high hills, where the passes go up to fourteen thousand feet, the rivers foam over glittering rocks, the alpine meadows are green and flower-studded, the kingfisher flits from darkness into sunlight, the cuckoo calls at noon in

<sup>1</sup> *India’s North West Frontier* by Sir William Barton, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> It is sad to record that before the end of the Raj the old building was pulled down; but the marble tablet was affixed to its successor, thus giving a wrong impression. However, says a great lover of the Frontier, ‘the garden remains as beautiful as ever, but the spirit of the place has fled away’. (Sir Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans*, p. 337.)

the deep wood, and the great mountains stand, snow-capped ramparts, stretching away into the farthest distance.

The following year, 1935, was not so peaceful, but its chief event, another Mohmand expedition, was of considerable importance in Auchinleck's life. In the arena of great events, into which he was to step in a few years' time, it was a year of major significance: the India Act, which was the prelude to the attainment of complete independence in the sub-continent, passed through its final Parliamentary stages and received the Royal Assent, and Sir Samuel Hoare (who had had to pilot the Bill<sup>1</sup> through a massive and historic series of debates) moved from the India Office to the Foreign Office; and Mussolini made his preparations for a war of colonial conquest in Ethiopia. The sense of restlessness was widespread and infectious. On the North-West Frontier of India the Mohmands fell under the influence of a fanatical agitator, the Haji of Turangzai, and his notorious sons, the three Badshah Guls. Their maraudings into the plains became more than a transitory nuisance; and as the summer neared its end, the Government of India decided to undertake a quite sizeable operation against the tribesmen. The G.O.C. of the District, General Muspratt, was on furlough in the United Kingdom, and Auchinleck was acting on his behalf. His brigade and the Nowshera Brigade, the 18th K.E.O. Cavalry and a section of the 2nd Light Tank Company of the Royal Tank Corps were mobilized at short notice.

In command of the Nowshera Brigade was Brigadier the Hon. H. R. L. Alexander;<sup>2</sup> as the senior brigadier, Auchinleck took command of the whole force, which was named 'Mohforce'. This was the beginning of a professional association, deepening into close personal friendship, which was to be of no small significance in the lives of both men. Alexander was also of Irish stock, of the Ascendancy. He was the third son of the fourth Earl of Caledon. At Harrow he had been a member of the Cricket XI and played in the same memorable Eton and Harrow match as Walter Monckton at Lord's in 1910. As a Guards officer he had a notable fighting record in World War I. In the mid-nineteen-thirties he was regarded as one of the most promising soldiers of his generation. He was of serene and equable disposition, fearless, impossible to ruffle, courteous, thoughtless of self, loyal in friendship and incapable of malice.

<sup>1</sup> One of its most relentless opponents was Winston Churchill, one of its most earnest advocates was Leopold Amery. When Churchill became Prime Minister in 1940, Amery was appointed Secretary of State for India. He secured Auchinleck's first appointment as C.-in-C. in India.

<sup>2</sup> Later F.M. the Earl Alexander of Tunis.

Auchinleck and Alexander worked together in cheerful harmony. The operation was not without its hazards. The main body's first day of advance into the hills—in conditions of torrid heat, with the temperature at 102° or over—saw many hours of long, hard fighting to clear the snipers from their hiding-places in the rocky steeps on either side of the road. The tank section—the tanks were Vickers Mark IIB, each armed with one Vickers machine-gun—was ordered to act as point to the advanced guard of the main force. This was the first time that tanks were used operationally in India. They were at some disadvantage because, although they were normally fitted with wireless, the sets had been withdrawn for their annual overhaul and they had to take the field without them.

The advanced guard—tanks, infantry, artillery, sappers and miners—had the task of picketing the heights and clearing the road, to permit the main force to advance unmolested. The tanks went ahead in sub-sections of two tanks each, giving mutual support and covering fire. They kept a considerable distance in front of the leading troops, and were thus able to outflank and enfilade with fire the ridges and hills on which the tribesmen had taken up their positions. Their presence was something of a shock to the tribesmen and it enabled the infantry to get their pickets out more easily. The lack of wireless, however, made it difficult to maintain contact between the tanks and the infantry; one tank therefore had to act as 'runner'. The advance was steady, but not particularly rapid. By nightfall the camp site picked for the Nowshera Brigade had not yet been reached, and all the units were dispersed as pickets and escorts all along the route. Somewhat gingerly the two brigadiers, Auchinleck and Alexander, accompanying the last platoon, moved on to the camp site in the dusk, hoping that the enemy had left the surrounding hills. They had. Auchinleck unashamedly confessed his relief.

The Governor of the North-West Frontier Province, Sir Ralph Griffith, had had a proclamation distributed throughout the territory, making it clear that, whether the Mohmands resisted them or not, the troops would advance into Kamal'ai, the tribal heartland, a plateau to the west of the Swat River. The Governor emphasized the seriousness of this intention by quoting, in the course of the proclamation, a Pushtu proverb which said: 'The dawn will come even if the cock does not crow.'

The road ended, however, where the defile opened on to a dried river valley some hundred yards in width. Before the force could advance and tackle the next and last major obstacle guarding the tribe's home, the Nahakki Pass (which was a mule-track through hills

some 2,000 to 2,500 feet above the valley floor), an extension of the road had to be made. The force built for itself a perimeter camp, on the ancient Roman model, with all-round defences and at night pickets out on the surrounding heights. In the valley the tanks could deploy, and from the camp there were daily infantry sorties, sometimes in company, sometimes in brigade strength, supported by the tanks, in order to dominate the countryside and wear down the tribesmen's resistance. Meanwhile, the force increased to a total of four brigades and, through some six weeks, the road building went on steadily. The tanks, despite difficulties due to dust and the lack of water, continued to prove their usefulness, even if their official historian did subsequently say that this phase of the operation 'involved long, boring daily tasks'<sup>1</sup> for them. Working always in their sub-sections, they would move from one observation post to another; when small groups of tribesmen, fighting in their traditional fashion, stalked and pinned down the infantry pickets, the tanks could move round on their flank and rake them with machine-gun fire. The Mohmands, having no weapons capable of dealing with it, disliked this innovation considerably; and since their language supplied no word for 'tanks' they called them 'the snakes that spit'.

A swift and successful night operation, involving three brigades on the move simultaneously—itsself a rarity in Frontier warfare—brought about the occupation of all the heights around the Nahakki Pass, and after dawn the cavalry went through on to the broad plain beyond. The road was extended and a section of tanks was sent through to operate with Auchinleck's forward force, which in strength now amounted to a brigade group. General Muspratt returned, took command of 'Mohforce' and set up his headquarters five or six miles south of the Nahakki Pass. On September 22 G.H.Q. in Simla issued a statement declaring:

The British and Indian troops astride the Nahakki Pass are consolidating their positions. Under their protection the Gandab road will be extended to a place in the Kamalai Plain which has yet to be decided; the extension of the road is essential in order to secure supplies for the troops.<sup>2</sup> The Mohmand Force will remain at Kamalai for such a period as the Government considers

<sup>1</sup> *The Tanks* by Capt. B. H. Liddell Hart, Vol. I, p. 412. This section of the book was contributed by Maj. E. W. Sheppard and others.

<sup>2</sup> The quality of the tanks' achievement in going across is emphasized by the fact that all these supplies had to be carried by camels, as the gradients were too steep for lorries.

necessary to secure the establishment of permanent peace, and the Government's final orders to the tribes will be promulgated from a camp which is being established at Kamalai.

The Acting Chief of the General Staff, Major-General Eric de Burgh, and the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, Brigadier (later General Sir Alan) Hartley, had both been up to watch the operations. It was believed that the tribesmen, not a little awed by the size of the force deployed against them, were dispersing and intended to despatch a *jirga* to Force H.Q. to sue for peace. Then, a little more than a week after Simla's confident statement, there occurred a minor disaster which, however, did not involve Auchinleck's brigade. In a sketchily planned and unco-ordinated reconnaissance in force to the south-west of Nahakki, the 5th/12th Frontier Force Regiment (the Guides), with some accompanying artillery, were ambushed by a powerful and well-concealed body of tribesmen; there was some fierce hand-to-hand fighting, and a number of casualties, totalling two British officers and two Indian officers killed, four British officers and two Indian officers wounded, one British other rank and thirty Indian other ranks killed, one British and forty-seven Indian other ranks wounded. This, however, was the tribesmen's last spurt; they withdrew to their villages; the septs and sub-tribes sent their *jirgas* to ask for peace and the tension relaxed. The Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Chetwode, came up in the middle of October with the Chief of the General Staff, and it was reported that he was impressed by the skill and speed with which the road had been built over the Nahakki Pass and water pumped across the hills for the forward troops. Other visitors included the Governor of the North-West Frontier Province and the Finance Member of the Government of India, Sir James Grigg.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the month all was quiet. Auchinleck's brigade marched out of camp with the drums and pipes of its bands playing in the fore. These, said Auchinleck, had been brought up 'surreptitiously—for swank'. But they gave the episode its final *panache*. For his part in the first and smaller Mohmand expedition of 1933 Auchinleck had received a C.B.; at the end of this much larger operation he was awarded the C.S.I. He had a full and arduous winter of training with his brigade, and in the New Year—1936—was promoted to major-general and went off on furlough to the

<sup>1</sup> Subsequently Permanent Under-Secretary at the War Office and from 1942 to 1945 Secretary of State for War.



United Kingdom, handing over his command to Brigadier Richard O'Connor.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck and his wife spent their leave—that strange, troublous summer of 1936—partly with the family at Kinloch Rannoch and partly in England. His mother, aged eighty-six, had, though neither he nor she could know, only another year to live. Late that summer he was recalled to India to become Deputy Chief of the General Staff at Army Headquarters, Simla. India, and India's armed forces, were moving into an era of profound and radical changes. Lord Linlithgow, who had presided with conspicuous ability over what was in fact the third (and most successful) Indian Round Table Conference but was officially known as the Joint Select Committee, appointed by Parliament to draw up the Indian Federal Constitution, had become Viceroy and Governor-General, in succession to Lord Willingdon. Auchinleck's old friend, and to some extent mentor, General Sir Robert Cassels, was Commander-in-Chief. General de Burgh was C.G.S. Auchinleck had proved his capacity as a teacher and leader of men, as a staff officer with limited but real responsibility, and as a field commander in an operation of tactical, though not strategic, interest and importance. Every practical as well as theoretical test which his necessarily exacting profession must impose he had passed with increasing distinction. As so often recurs in the pattern of human life, the man and the opportunity met.

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The final decisions on policy in India, until the end of the British Raj, were taken by a limited group of men at the centre. Eighteenth-century principles and practice survived in a nineteenth-century administrative framework far into the twentieth century. It came as a shock to any visitor from the United Kingdom—especially if he arrived on an official, fact-finding mission—to discover how intimate was the life of power in the capital, either Delhi or Simla, and how few were the men who shared that life and its burdens. The bureaucracy which dealt with the affairs of four hundred million people was much smaller than that which, in the United Kingdom, controlled the existence of a progressive social democracy of some fifty million. In this respect—and perhaps it may be argued in others—the Government of India was, even in the nineteen-thirties,

<sup>1</sup> Later Gen. Sir Richard O'Connor. Born in 1889, he was a contemporary at Wellington of Auchinleck's younger brother. He commanded the Western Desert Corps in the victorious campaign of 1940-1 and was a master of desert tactics, a notable commander and leader of men.

archaic. The Commander-in-Chief and his principal staff officers were within that limited circle of policy-makers.

This was the circle which Auchinleck now joined. There is what many outsiders regard as a surprising degree of flexibility in the higher staff levels in the Army. A senior post is very much what the occupant cares to make it. Auchinleck, if he chose, was as D.C.G.S. in a key position. He made his choice unhesitatingly. He brought to his task, at their height, the qualities with which his heredity had endowed him, which all his previous career had tempered and strengthened: his capacity for thinking along original and unconventional lines, his zest, his freedom from fuss or pettiness, his organizing and administrative ability and his vision.

It is ironic to reflect that in the three vital years 1936-9, thinking on the fundamental issues in policy-making was both more advanced and more realistic among those who were actually responsible in India than it was in corresponding circles in the United Kingdom. The fundamental issues which confronted the Government of India were: India's constitutional and political evolution, within the framework established by the India Act of 1935; India's place, then and subsequently, in the Commonwealth; and the state of her preparedness for war. Policy decisions on all these three were conceived to be correct when they contributed to the ultimate purpose of the Government of India's existence—the peaceful transference of power to the people of India themselves. The transference of power was not now a remote possibility like the Greek Kalends: it was a foreseeable event for which all concerned had resolutely to prepare themselves. The realization of this fact was the momentous result of the Round Table Conferences and of the Parliamentary debates on the India Bill; how far its translation into action, in the years that followed, was due to the moral strength and integrity of the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, it is as yet impossible to determine, but the evidence of his steady, guiding influence is strong. There can, however, be no doubt that the great majority of responsible officers, in the civil and political services and in the Army, were fully seized of the final purpose of British rule in India.

So far as the Army was concerned, one important path to the fulfilment of this purpose lay through a process which was known, rather horribly, as 'Indianization'. There had been Indian officers holding the King's commission in the Indian Army since just after the end of World War I; young men of suitable background and antecedents were selected, and sent to Sandhurst and through the same regimental mill as their British counterparts. They were the smallest handful, and by the end of the nineteen-thirties they had

hardly begun to attain even field rank. It was proposed rapidly to increase their complement, and to extend the facilities for their recruitment and training (in India, rather than in the United Kingdom); and it was decided that certain selected units should become, as soon as possible, Indian-officered only. This last was a policy which Auchinleck and others held to be unwise, on military as well as on social grounds. Someone invented the term 'Jim Crow regiments', which summed up, brutally enough, all the undesirable aspects of such a policy. Auchinleck knew—none better—and understood and admired the military capacity of the Indians in whose company he had served and fought so long.<sup>1</sup> But since, at that time, there could be no question of the withdrawal of all British officers from the Indian Army, he was rightly convinced that British and Indian officers, in all arms and at all levels, should meet and mingle, work together and share their leisure. His view was fully and tragically vindicated only a few years later.

Post-Mutiny segregation of the rulers and the ruled had created unnecessary, harmful and deep gulfs. Official life and business life in India had been stultified by the existence of these gulfs. The Army, in pursuance of its plain duty as well as by reason of its mixed racial composition, had always maintained its own bridges across the gulfs. There was one particular gulf, however, which, of necessity, remained unbridged. The Army, in standing—as, of course, it had to stand—aloof from politics, was also aloof from politicians. Caste apart, Indian society was deeply stratified (caste indeed only codified and gave religious and moral sanctions to the existence of these strata), and the men who went into politics were different, in background, outlook and temperament, from the men who went into the Army. The British officer of the Indian Army knew and liked and respected the Indian soldier and his family; if he achieved considerable seniority he might encounter, in his work, senior Indian civilian officials and develop for them a similar liking and respect. But the politicians were strangers to him, and he was a stranger to them.

This was a serious misfortune, for it meant that the politicians, in their struggle for independence, misunderstood and underrated the Indian Army; and in the critical period immediately before and

<sup>1</sup> There is a story—its origin unfortunately is shrouded in mystery—that during the Mohmand operations, when a British battalion fell out on the march, unable to endure its arduous in the heat of a Frontier summer, Auchinleck, listening to the rueful explanations of its C.O. as well as the angry criticisms of others, said, 'The British soldier, I believe, can be just as good on the Frontier as the Indian soldier, if he is properly trained and properly led.'

during World War II they failed to appreciate how closely, in truth, the Army could and would identify itself—without any involvement in politics—with the best interests of India as a whole. In this respect, therefore, those responsible for the development of India's defence policy, including the expansion and modernization of the Services, persevered at some disadvantage.

Nor, indeed, was this the only disadvantage under which they laboured. India was poor in everything except the quantity and quality of her manpower; and her defence requirements—though it was vaguely admitted that the defence of India was vital to the defence of the Empire and Commonwealth as a whole—ranked low in a list of strategic priorities the rate of whose over-all fulfilment was still (between 1936 and 1939) alarmingly sluggish and unrealistic. In the United Kingdom, the Defence White Paper of 1935 had inaugurated a slow, timid and inexpensive process of re-armament, in answer to a German threat which could still be played down but no longer ignored. Italian provocation at the time of Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia had thrown a harsh light on British impotence in an area in which it was of the utmost importance that British responsibilities, interests and communications should be securely maintained. The Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936 was a prompt and salutary reaction; but the developments of the next two or three years—the Arab revolt in Palestine, the opening of powerful radio propaganda stations and the aggressive exploitation of Arab nationalism—showed that both Germany and Italy intended to do their best to disrupt the British hegemony in this area. In the Far East, Japan was undisguisedly on the offensive.

India's strategic situation obviously ought to have been considered to be of paramount importance. It was not. Since the Victorian hey-day the general British fund of interest in and knowledge of India had diminished sharply, for a complex variety of reasons; and in the sheerly military sphere there was a tendency to think in terms of what it would cost to defend India in the event of war rather than of what India could and would contribute to a global Commonwealth defence system.

It was, for example, conventional military doctrine that India would neither offer nor be asked to contribute contingents for service in any possible war in Europe, or indeed in any campaign outside her own borders. The Indian Army was regarded with a curious but deep-rooted suspicion (often in quarters where much more knowledge might have been expected), and India's willingness and capacity to contribute to a co-ordinated Commonwealth defence plan were both grossly underestimated.

Despite these difficulties and doubts, despite the slow rate of progress which stringent financial control was bound to impose, India achieved a great deal during the three years immediately before the outbreak of World War II; and in relation to her resources entered the war at least no less prepared for its prime exigencies than did the United Kingdom. This achievement owed much to the tenacity and determination of the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief; but Auchinleck's part in it was of singular importance. He supplied the impetus of up-to-date and day-to-day knowledge. He advanced major propositions, and the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief supported him.

He was the least deskbound of staff officers. As soon as he took up his new appointment, he asked permission to go off and make a comprehensive tour of Waziristan, which in these years was the main trouble-spot of the North-West Frontier, and of which he had no previous personal experience.

The story of Waziristan was a tortuous one, and not characteristic of British Frontier policy at its wisest and most enlightened. The tribes of the region, Mahsuds and Wazirs, were nomadic, truculent and prone to violence on a major scale. Conventional methods of settlement and control failed consistently when applied to them; the growth of political agitation increased their instability, and when a leader emerged, in the person of a fanatical mullah, the Faqir of Ipi, the extremism of whose politics was only excelled by the nastiness of his private life, the problem assumed major proportions. A large-scale campaign was launched in 1936 to subdue the unrest throughout the territory, and it proved to be costly and protracted. When it was brought to a close in December 1937, the objectionable Faqir (who was reputed to carry his catamite about with him in a cage) was still at large with his principal lieutenants. The Government claimed that his prestige was sharply on the wane, but he was to bob up, as viciously hostile as ever, in 1943 when the Army was heavily engaged elsewhere. From start to finish some forty thousand troops, British and Indian, had been engaged; the drain on India's slender finances amounted to one and a half million pounds sterling, and casualties, in killed and wounded, had been not far short of one thousand.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It was strange that, in these circumstances, a student of the problems of the N.W. Frontier could argue (in 1939) that 'the tribal losses in men and material, the dislocation of tribal life caused by the presence of large bodies of troops in tribal country, would exert a strong influence in favour of peace', and that 'the British Government had shown that, whatever the political agitator might say, British military strength was unimpaired and that they were willing to use it'. *India's North West Frontier* by Sir William Barton, pp. 232-3.

After his visit to Waziristan, Auchinleck returned to Headquarters, which were stationed in Delhi in the cold weather, in Simla in the summer. In New Delhi, the Auchinlecks had a very agreeable house and garden, and they began to entertain a good deal. Auchinleck's work as D.C.G.S. was in the vital fields of training, of planning for war, of organization for war, and of the modernization of the Army.

The result of the forethought and planning of a small number of officers, including Auchinleck, was that when war came, India was to a remarkable degree militarily prepared for it, and was able to offer assistance to the general war effort on a scale greater than had been either expected or asked.

Early in 1938 Colonel Eric Dorman-Smith was appointed Director of Military Training at A.H.Q. He had never previously served in India, but he was a young staff officer of lively intellect and high professional attainments and reputation.<sup>1</sup> His work brought him into close association with Auchinleck, and since they were both early risers who took long morning walks, it spilled over into their private lives. As the sunlight strengthened over the wooded hills their talk swirled and eddied round two subjects of major importance: the future of their shared profession and the future of India. Both had opinions far in advance of those of most of their contemporaries; both masked—with varying degrees of efficiency—an inner disregard and dislike for conventionality with an outward conformity. Auchinleck's mask was a massive, tenacious reserve, Dorman-Smith's an elegant flamboyance.

Throughout 1938 the shadow of oncoming war loomed larger and larger; yet since the avowed political purpose of the British Government, in the field of international relations, was the appeasement of what were considered to be wrongs and injustices, the essential planning—even in matters of equipment and organization—had to be accomplished in secret and under cover. Within the limits of her resources, India had to be prepared to take an effective part in the war, if and when it broke out. This the Government of India recognized to be its plain duty; but co-operation by and support from the Government of the United Kingdom were reluctant, belated and far from enthusiastic, and what operational role Indian forces might have to play was never clearly defined by the home Government.

<sup>1</sup> With three brevets he had risen from captain to colonel in six years. He was an elder brother of Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, Minister of Agriculture in Neville Chamberlain's Government and Governor of Burma, 1940-6.

Initially, therefore, the Government of India, on its own responsibility, set about the task of reorganizing India's defence system. In the summer of 1938 the Commander-in-Chief appointed a Modernization Committee in A.H.Q. Since the C.G.S. was on home leave, Auchinleck, as D.C.G.S., was chairman of this committee, whose other members were the Director of Staff Duties, the Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, General Molesworth, and the Director of Military Training, Colonel Dorman-Smith. They worked rapidly and at a considerable pitch of intensity. The scope of their discussions and of the recommendations which they could make was wide but vague. It had been laid down for them in a paper prepared for the Imperial Conference held in London in the previous, Coronation, year, in which the role of the Army and the Air Force of India had been declared to be:

... the defence of her land frontiers against aggression by a second-class power; initial operation with available forces and pending the arrival of Imperial reinforcements, to protect her land frontiers against aggression by a first-class power; the close defence of her coastline against seaborne aggression; the support of the civil power in the maintenance of internal law and order; and if the situation in India permits, the provision in an emergency of some assistance to the Imperial Forces outside India.<sup>1</sup>

Towards the fulfilment of these responsibilities, it is worth noting, the British Government made from 1933 onwards an annual contribution of £1,500,000, which was by no means sufficient. The financial stringency within which the Modernization Committee had to work was therefore severe. However, they set to it with a will. Behind a locked door they contemplated a large-scale wall map of India, on which they superimposed a 'master plan' for a modern Army and defence system. It envisaged a reshaping as radical and as far-reaching as Kitchener's thirty-four years earlier. The most important of its detailed and comprehensive recommendations was the regrouping of the Army in India in five basic categories:

*Frontier Defence Troops*, to maintain control over the frontier tribes and to defend the frontier;

*Internal Security Troops*, to maintain law and order in India, to suppress a possible 'rebellion' and to safeguard vital railways;

*Coast Defence Troops*, to defend the major ports of Karachi,

<sup>1</sup> *Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organization* by S. N. Prasad.

Bombay, Calcutta and Madras against attacks from the sea or air and also to maintain local internal security;

*The General Reserve*, to reinforce the previous three categories of troops, if required, and for active warfare; and

*The External Defence Troops*, to reinforce and defend certain outposts beyond India's boundaries, but considered vital for her security.

Included in the General Reserve were three brigade groups which were ear-marked for despatch overseas at the request of the British Government, with the proviso that they should only fulfil such a role if the Government of India considered that the internal situation permitted it. These three brigade groups were to form, as events proved, the trained and equipped nucleus of the two divisions which, after the outbreak of war, India was able to offer for immediate operational service in the Middle East and East Africa. Their modernization and mechanization was to be regarded, despite all financial difficulties, as of the highest priority.

Auchinleck's part in the work of the Modernization Committee was decisive. He impressed one of his brother-officers on it with the breadth of his mind, his receptiveness towards new ideas and his capacity to translate novel theories into practice. His was the task of the catalyst. When the committee's report was completed, Auchinleck took it immediately to the Commander-in-Chief and expounded its recommendations in detail himself. 'It was the bravest thing Auk ever did,' commented the same brother-officer, who had perhaps less knowledge of or respect for the Commander-in-Chief's qualities, as a man and as a soldier, than Auchinleck possessed. General Cassels accepted the report at once and *in toto*. However, the opportunity for its implementation was almost immediately to be swallowed up in larger plans. The committee finished their work as the news of Neville Chamberlain's agreement with Hitler at Munich reverberated round the world. Chamberlain himself was without doubt sincere when he proclaimed to the cheering crowd in Downing Street that he had brought home 'peace in our time'; but he and his colleagues in the British Government thereafter began, though with little energy or enthusiasm, preparations for the war which was to begin in less than a year; and this indeed has always been the weightiest, most publicized argument offered in support of the Munich settlement.

On 24 October 1938, just a month after Munich, the Secretary of State for India, Lord Zetland, wrote to General Auchinleck:



On the invitation of the Government of India the Prime Minister has agreed to the appointment of a Committee with the following terms of reference:

'Having regard to the increased cost of modern armaments, to the desirability of organizing, equipping and maintaining the Forces in India in accordance with modern requirements, and to the limited resources available in India for defence expenditure, to examine and report, in the light of experience gained in executing the British rearmament programme, how these resources can be used to the best advantage, and to make recommendations.'

I have been asked to invite you to serve as a Member of the Committee; and I do so with the fullest confidence in the wisdom of our choice.

I should add that the terms of reference which I have quoted are those which have already been publicly announced. The full terms of reference however contain an addition which for obvious reasons it is not intended to publish. The addition is underlined in what follows:

'In the light of the recent Report by the Chiefs of Staffs and of the Report of the Cabinet Committee on the Defence of India and having regard to the increased cost of modern armaments', etc.

The public announcement to which Lord Zetland referred had been made nine days earlier. The committee's membership consisted of a number of experts, Service and civilian, in various fields of armament manufacture and supply. The chairman was Admiral of the Fleet Lord Chatfield, one of the most eminent sailors of his day, who had been Flag-Captain to Beatty at Jutland, and who had lately quitted, at the age of sixty-five, the post of First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff. The Government of India were fully seized of the need for urgency in the matter. Auchinleck was ordered to fly to Port Said to meet Chatfield and the rest of the committee on their way out by sea. At their first full meeting on board the ship, Auchinleck brought his own Modernization Committee's report out of his pocket and suggested that they might care to look at it. They studied it carefully, realized how comprehensive and far-reaching a document it was, and spared themselves a good deal of unnecessary discussion.

Throughout the cold weather of 1938-9 the Chatfield Committee were at work, based in Delhi but visiting the Frontier and inspecting factories and installations. They called a considerable number of witnesses before them, including politicians and officials as well as

Service officers. Their terms of reference included all the armed forces and they made provision for the expansion and modernization both of the Royal Indian Navy and of the R.A.F. in India. Their full recommendations were never made public, since they would have revealed both the magnitude of the deficiencies in India's defence in face of a situation growing steadily more menacing, and the extremely limited extent to which those deficiencies could be repaired.<sup>1</sup> India's defences, no less than those of the United Kingdom, had suffered severely from the years which the locusts had eaten—the years of disarmament, financial and economic stringency, lethargic and small-scale rearmament, pacifism and appeasement—and her plight, in the instant of challenge, was to be just as grievous as the United Kingdom's. The blame for these deficiencies certainly does not lie with those who, tardily, were given the tasks of trying to repair them with still pitifully small resources, and thereafter, in the inevitable conflict, of stemming the onrush of enemy advance.

By the end of January 1939 the Chatfield Committee's work was completed. It was announced in London that from April 1 onwards the British Government would increase its annual defence grant to India by £500,000, and would also put at India's disposal a capital sum of £5,000,000 in order to fulfil the recommendations which, it was understood, the Chatfield Committee were about to make. It was also announced on January 29 that Lord Chatfield, following the example of his famous predecessor Lord Barham (who was First Lord of the Admiralty at the time of Trafalgar), was joining the Cabinet in the post of Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. It was said that the news of this appointment had been received with genuine satisfaction in Delhi, where in his recent work he had effectively demonstrated his capacity for analysis and co-ordination.

Lord Chatfield and his committee left Delhi by air on January 30 for London, in order to complete the final stages of their report and then present it to the British Government. It was early spring before the job was finished and Auchinleck could have some leave. He was joined by his wife; they went for some weeks to her family in Scotland, and then travelled about the country in that last bleak, uneasy summer before the outbreak of war. In July they went to the United States. Jessie Auchinleck had lived there as a girl; to him it was quite a new experience. They stayed with friends in Westchester, New York; they went to New York City and they went

<sup>1</sup> A detailed and comprehensive list of the naval, military and air establishments recommended by the Chatfield Committee is, however, to be found in S. N. Prasad's *Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organization*, Part I, pp. 6-44, and Appendixes.

south to Virginia, and stayed near Winchester. The beauty of the country delighted Auchinleck, but he looked at it too with the eye of a student of military history. He saw the Blue Mountains and the Shenandoah and remembered that as a young officer he had read Henderson's biography of Stonewall Jackson, and had first learned the lesson of the value of mobility and surprise. It was a lesson which he never forgot, which he was to apply to more than one battle at the height of his career as field commander in World War II.

The Auchinlecks were only in the United States for a few weeks. They left a Britain sombrely nervous at the idea of the approach of war, with practice black-outs in the cities and other cumbrous signs of preparation, both civil and military. In America there was no tension at all; the thought of war was very remote. They were back at Kinloch Rannoch in August. Before the month was out the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was announced. Poland was invaded. General Auchinleck received orders to report at Edinburgh on Sunday, September 3. He made a dash to London to collect his kit, money and any news he could pick up, but all he heard was rumour. He walked into the North British Hotel in Edinburgh on the afternoon of Saturday, September 2. The lounge, the dining-room and the bar seethed with old friends, many of whom he had not seen for years, men of every arm and service, British and Indian, all hastily recalled. There was a black-out, and civilian gas-masks were hurriedly issued. There was a tedious and comfortless journey to Greenock that night, senior officers—and he was the most senior of them all—having to hump their own cabin trunks and uniform cases across platforms and quaysides deserted of porters.<sup>1</sup>

The ship in which they embarked was the *Duchess of Bedford*, a Canadian Pacific liner built for the North Atlantic run and unequipped with fans or any other hot-weather amenities. Auchinleck, in recognition of his seniority, had a cabin to himself, and was thereby fortunate. On the morning of Sunday, September 3, everyone aboard listened to Neville Chamberlain's broadcast declaration

<sup>1</sup> Seven years later, when Auchinleck was promoted Field-Marshal, Sir Arthur Lothian, then Resident in Hyderabad, remembered this embarkation when he wrote: 'My dear Auk, As one of your many friends and admirers in India, may I say how pleased I was to see that His Majesty the King has honoured your war services by conferring on you the highest rank open to a soldier. You have had a gruelling time since we left the quay at Greenock together in 1939 and experienced many vicissitudes. I cannot therefore tell you how pleased I am that now when the show is ending, you have come out on top.'

of war. He was heard in the same glum calm as in countless homes, in emergency offices, and on newly sand-bagged gun-sites throughout the country. Nobody cheered, and when the speech was ended work went dourly on with blacking the ship out and preparing her for sea. She was one of a convoy of twelve, many of which peeled off *en route*. It was a slow, comfortless and uneventful voyage, and the passage through the Red Sea was exceptionally disagreeable. The fact that he had given up smoking during the hot weather in Peshawar five years before and had never thereafter missed it meant that Auchinleck was spared at least one discomfort: he could escape from the overcrowded public rooms, with their fug of beer, sweat and smoke, on to the darkness of the decks where smoking was forbidden.

The ship reached Bombay at the beginning of October; there was a cheerful disembarkation carousal at the Taj Mahal Hotel, and everyone dispersed to their stations. Auchinleck went to Delhi and saw General Cassels. Nominally he had been G.O.C.-in-C. the Meerut District (the 3rd Indian Division) since the beginning of the year, and his orders now were to take up this appointment. His headquarters were at Dehra Dun, in the foothills of the Himalayas, but the District was large and sprawling, consisting of numerous cantonments, stretching to Jhansi, south of Delhi. He at once set about training the troops for modern mobile war; but he laboured under considerable disadvantages. The only armoured fighting vehicles in India were a handful of light tanks, belonging to two R.T.C. companies and deployed along the North-West Frontier (where, indeed, Auchinleck had used them successfully in the Mohmand campaign in 1935). The 14/20th Hussars stationed at Meerut itself—the cantonment steeped in memories of the outbreak of the Mutiny—began to be mechanized, and hived off a new Hussar regiment also due for mechanization. This in itself in India in 1939 was a slow, difficult process. A great part of the division's training, therefore, was bound to consist of imagination and improvisation.

It was not made any more realistic by the general atmosphere prevalent in India at that time. The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, was under no illusions about the magnitude of the ordeal which lay ahead. He had, immediately after the outbreak of war, committed India—as was his constitutional right—to full support of Britain's war effort. But the country's political leaders, who within the terms of the 1935 Act had made a beginning in the workings of elected and responsible government at the provincial level, felt that they ought to have been consulted. They were touchy and resentful, and wavered between emotional identification with 'the fight against

Fascism', a sulky suspicion that the British, talking largely about the right of peoples such as the Poles and Czechs to their national independence, would continue to deny that right to Indians, and an outright nationalist belief that Britain's difficulty could be India's opportunity. The lack of interest of the political leaders (those of Congress especially) in the Indian Army, and their ignorance of the Army, were contributory factors in a situation which deeply disturbed and distressed Auchinleck.

In his months first on the Chatfield Committee and then on leave in the United Kingdom he had come to a vivid and entirely realistic appreciation of the severity of the challenge to be faced; he had acquired, too, a considerable interior knowledge of the inadequacy of the preparations, psychological as well as practical and military, which had hitherto been made to meet that challenge.

The sight of the whole peace-time merry-go-round in play in India—staff officers at A.H.Q. going to their offices in mufti, parties galore, polo, leave to the hills—affected him so badly that, after a time, he stopped going to Delhi. Yet grieved as he was, and alarmed, he was too loyal and too clear-sighted to lay the blame for this state of affairs on India. A gulf, deeper than that of mere geographical distance, now yawned between Britain and India. The 'jewel of Empire' no longer gleamed with special lustre in British eyes. There was already, and it was to manifest itself much more sharply and widely in the succeeding decade, a weariness among the British with the burdens and the responsibilities of empire; mistrust and cynicism had replaced faith and pride. The Indian Army itself was profoundly misunderstood and underestimated; jokes about 'Poona colonels' were common form, and Low's Colonel Blimp was thought to be their prototype. This atmosphere of misunderstanding was rife in quarters where there ought to have been better knowledge and wiser counsels; and Indian offers of military aid were treated with a chilly, supercilious disdain, at once imprudent and shameful. Could India altogether fairly be blamed for taking the attitude that those who held authority in Britain regarded the war (and particularly the war in Europe) as their own private affair, and that India's contributions were likely to be cold-shouldered, and for wondering whether it was worth while making any special effort?<sup>1</sup>

Both sides were mistaken, and a great deal of intelligence and

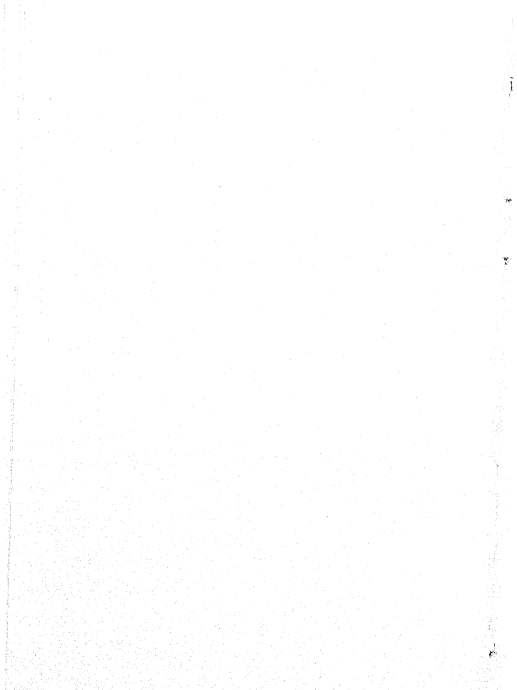
<sup>1</sup> Yet 4th Indian Division, for whose high standard of preparedness both in training and equipment for war Auchinleck himself was in large part responsible, had already, before he left for the U.K., gone to Egypt to form part of Gen. Wavell's Middle East Force. This contribution alone—if India had made no other—was of imperishable value.

energy had to be expended later in rectifying these mistakes, but they did undoubtedly harm at the beginning of the war, and they left a residue of incomprehension which was never completely dissipated.

It was with relief amounting to joy, therefore, that Auchinleck heard from General Cassels in January 1940 that he had been ordered to return to the United Kingdom at once to take command of a corps there.

The Commander-in-Chief looked at his friend of nearly a quarter of a century (and, had they both been able to foresee it, his destined successor) and said, in the tone of one who expects that his statement may affect any consequent decision, 'You'll have to fly, of course.'

Flying, especially over long distances, was not yet a usual mode of travel for senior officers; and Auchinleck hitherto had had almost less than his share of it. But of course fly he did, in a venerable civilian aircraft with a top speed of about ninety miles per hour, in which he was the only passenger. This was the first, and in its own way the most momentous, of many journeys of this kind which he was to make. He sat with his broad shoulders hunched under his coat. Can any man tell when he comes to one of the great watersheds of his life? He was a man accustomed to giving orders and obeying them; this journey was the response to an order which it never occurred to him to question. He was not a thrusting, power-seeking rebel who would calculate the importance to himself of a well-timed act of insubordination; nor, on the other hand, were his patterns of thought restricted by routine and convention. That he was now selected for rapid promotion to senior command was neither fortuitous nor ill-considered. The whole of his life heretofore had been a prelude to such a selection. He travelled now over many thousands of miles of territory the defence of which was, after a very brief interval of time, to be his personal and heavy responsibility. He travelled to close on eight years of incessant and wellnigh intolerably burdensome labour, to battle, to defeat and victory, to fame and to tragedy. A man may brood, in the long hours of solitude, about what he will do with the chances and the duties which he sees lying before him. He cannot foretell what will be done to him.

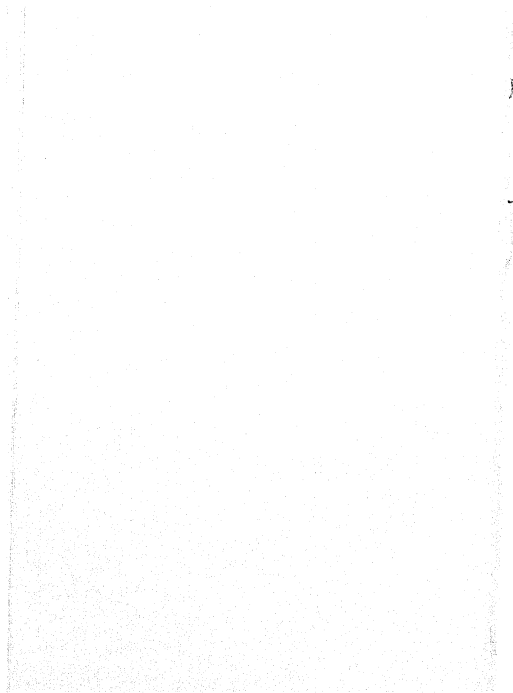


## BOOK II

The British public know very little of what our Army is, and the difficulty of commanding to their satisfaction one of theirs.

THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON





## CHAPTER FIVE

### Winter 1940

GENERAL AUCHINLECK had been summoned home in order to raise, train and command IV Corps, which was destined to join the B.E.F. in northern France in June 1940. When he arrived from India—the last stages of his journey across France from Marseilles, and so eventually to London, had been cheerless and melancholy—this was at best a somewhat skeletal formation.

While a senior commander must always be, to some extent, a man in isolation, Auchinleck's situation was exceptionally lonely. By training and by habit active, gregarious, friendly and forthright, he was not immediately aware of how isolated he was. The British Regular Army was a tightly knit, enclosed community, in the higher ranks consisting of a comparatively small number of men, linked in knowledge of each other (and of the Army as a whole) by years of association in friendship, argument, contest and rivalry for promotion. Auchinleck, by no wish of his own but in fulfilment of his proved capacity for command, had now gate-crashed this society. His whole Service career, in peace and in war, had been spent in and with the Indian Army. Only in recent years, as a brigadier and a major-general, had he had British units under his command, although of course he had constantly served alongside them.

If professionally he came as a comparative stranger to command a higher British formation in time of war, he was also socially more of a stranger than either he or those who selected him for the task fully recognized. His Scots-Irish descent, the severe financial stringency of his boyhood and young manhood, and in maturity his own developing tastes and interests, all contributed to set him apart from Regular officers of conventional English upper-class stock and education. The life which he had led in India gave him a real awareness of the social and professional concept of a hierarchy, though no overwhelming respect for it. There was not a trace of snobbishness in his character; and the British Regular Army, among its many noble and formidable virtues, numbers one minor vice (it is arguable that it is not even a vice)—an inveterate and all-

suffusing snobbishness. It is not primarily a matter of lineage, but of aptitudes, interests, tastes and conventions; and it expresses itself in incessant small talk, apparently desultory but in fact very sharply pointed. Since English upper-class society is impressionist in its techniques, therefore surprisingly tolerant of superficial eccentricity, but on the deeper levels of behaviour rigidly conformist, its members are baffled by a man like Auchinleck who seems on the surface serenely and totally conformist, and one of themselves, but whose inner character is original, solitary, questioning and vigorously deviationist. They are great ones for totems; and few of their totems—cricket was an outstanding example—had any meaning for Auchinleck. They are great ones for gossip; and their gossip was apt to bore him, sometimes to exasperate him. Their ideal is the amateur; he was resolutely professional.

These differences of temperament and outlook between Auchinleck and the majority of the British Regular officers with whom he had to associate, whom he had to command and to allot to specific tasks and duties, were—ironically enough—not mitigated but accentuated by his own massive and unmistakable integrity, his courtesy, his goodness of heart and his generosity. It is part of the group mentality of the English upper classes that from their early school-days onwards they will condescend to accept the authority and the leadership of an outsider, if he shows himself to be not only obviously different but hardly unlikeable; they can stomach the man whom they describe as 'a beast, but a just beast'. They excuse their dislike of him by admitting his unpleasing merits. No one, however, except an extremely odd fish, could confess frankly to disliking Auchinleck. They could only be, and they remained, baffled by him.

It should not, however, be imagined that the British Regular Army, at the beginning of the Second World War, was the unitary society which it had been a quarter of a century earlier, or that it was even particularly homogeneous. Not only did it manifest, in its own sphere, all the class differentiations of English society as a whole, it had also been riven for years by a schism which, on one plane, was a matter of technique and tactics, but on another, poignantly involved individuals and their group loyalties. It was poignant because men felt deeply and sincerely about it; it was perilous because it was entangled in controversy over a major development in the art of waging war—the proper use (or the misuse and virtual suppression) of the tank.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The whole story of this unhappy controversy has been told with lucidity and candour in Capt. B. H. Liddell Hart's *The Tanks*, Vol. I.

The argument has been summed up, brutally but aptly, as being between the garage-hand on one side and the cavalier on the other. In the British as in other Armies the cavalry had remained the chief upholders of the aristocratic, the knightly traditions in war; it had been their tactical achievement to maintain, when firepower was imperfectly developed, openness and freedom of manoeuvre for armies in action. The First World War, in which all the greatest industrial nations in the world were belligerents on a vast scale, witnessed rapid and overwhelming developments in the firepower of the infantryman's rifle and machine-gun, as well as of longer range artillery. The cavalry, who had been expected to move fast over open country, were pinned down, unhorsed and rendered useless in the long, murderous sterilities of trench warfare. Release from stalemate came only—piecemeal and tardily—with the British invention of the tank, which was intended to restore freedom of manoeuvre. Now the majority of the senior leaders of the British Army, at the end of World War I and in the years after it, were, by reason of birth and wealth rather than of intellect or soldierly achievement, cavalrymen.

And there was a strange ambivalence in their attitude towards the use of tanks. It did not need any marked degree of intelligence or sensitivity to be appalled and sickened by trench warfare at its most futile; but to realize that the tank showed the way to open, fast-moving war again, with all its tactical and strategic possibilities, (and to put that realization into practice in training and equipment) called for courageous and sustained efforts of thought and imagination. The capacity to make efforts of this kind was rare among British cavalry officers, bound in as they were by the powerful social *mystique* of the horse and all that it had meant for generations in their private as much as in their professional lives. It was inevitable but most unfortunate, therefore, that the major developments in the theory, teaching and practice of the British invention of tank warfare were left either to foreigners—the German, Guderian, for example, or the Frenchman, de Gaulle—or to officers who had learned, in the field, the basic principles of armoured fighting, who continued to ponder and to put into action as best they could these principles and logical extensions of them, but who were socially excluded from the ruling circle of cavalrymen.

The cavalrymen fought stubbornly against the replacement of the horse by the tank, and were assisted in their fight by influential politicians of similar background and outlook. When at last they were compelled to surrender on theory, they converted their defeat into victory (of a kind) by merging the Royal Tank Regiment with

all the cavalry regiments which had to be mechanized, to form the Royal Armoured Corps, by ousting (either into retirement or into singularly inappropriate postings) almost all the senior tank experts, the garage-hands, and by themselves taking command of the new armoured formations as they emerged.

This vitally important internal conflict was by no means resolved in the British Army when the Second World War began; and its effects were to be witnessed again and again throughout that war. Auchinleck, as an infantryman—and an Indian infantryman at that—had not been personally involved in the conflict in its earlier stages; he had had some practical experience of the use of light tanks in the Mohmand operations of 1935; he was certainly no subscriber to the equine *mystique*; and he was, by temperament and training, an open warfare commander, steeped in the principles of mobility and surprise. He was now to have subordinate to him armoured formation commanders, most of whom were cavalrymen; and he was to have his share—it might be argued, at crucial moments more than his share—of cavalrymen among his staff officers. He was virtually a stranger to them; and they, when the war began, and far into its course, were little more than strangers to the effective use of the tank. Their merits, as men and as soldiers, were numerous and agreeable, and are not to be discounted; it was their misfortune—and the misfortune of others, including Auchinleck—that they were, professionally speaking, imperfectly educated.

The results of the cavalrymen's long-sustained reign at the War Office were clearly visible in the training, equipment<sup>1</sup> and tactical dispositions of the British Army, both in the B.E.F. and in the new formations which were being raised in the United Kingdom, throughout the winter of 1939-40. In agreement with the French who, for different reasons, had reached military and socio-military conclusions even more disastrously mistaken than those which afflicted the British General Staff in the inter-war years, they prepared slowly and majestically for large-scale, static, defensive warfare in Europe on the pattern of 1916-18; and it was to these lamentable misconceptions of the nature of modern war that the Commander of IV Corps, the energetic, imaginative and highly promising officer summoned from the frontier outposts to the defence

<sup>1</sup> Just a year later a Royal Artillery subaltern, charged with arranging the billeting of the men of his battery in a North London suburb, discovered that the appropriate form issued to him by R.H.Q. for this purpose listed as candidates for billets, 'Officers, N.C.O.s, men, horses and enrolled women'—in that order.

of the empire's heart and centre, was bidden to gear his thought, his planning and his training of his troops.

Auchinleck arrived in England a little over half-way through that strange period which came to be known as the 'phoney' war, the psychological and symbolical significance of which has never been accurately assessed. It cannot but be obvious that, in the process of the destruction and supersession of the old order of nineteenth-century Western Europe (and Western Europe's world hegemony), the Second World War completed that which the First World War had begun. The eight months of the 'phoney' war were, for that old order, a pause on the threshold between life and death, before the beginning of a protracted mortal agony. In the United Kingdom the war was taken seriously but unrealistically—in marked contrast to France, where the full magnitude of the danger was recognized and the reaction was cynical and frivolous—and life, as September ended and the winter drew on, became a dismal, blacked-out, hushed caricature of ordinary existence, tinged by memories, at once slightly sinister and slightly preposterous, of the end of the First World War. It was as if the world of Old Bill and the 'Long, Long Trail' had been revived and brought partially up to date. The young Territorial and conscript soldiers wore a new kind of uniform called battle-dress, but their steel helmets and their rifles differed not at all from those which their fathers had carried. The B.E.F. settled down for the winter in positions in northern France where every village, every cross-road, every belt of young woodland bore a name tingling with history and folklore; and they were encouraged to sing, as they marched along the roads that their fathers had trudged, a despicable ditty about hanging their washing on the Siegfried Line.

All these were social misconceptions as lamentable as those which ruled in the sheerly military, strategic and tactical sphere. They were the expressions of a society without any strong and ringing recognition of purpose in itself or in its actions, of a society still led, as it had been led for the previous few terrible years, by a huddle of well-intentioned, tired, frightened old men. The Prime Minister, whose whole foreign policy had been shown to be a pack of pitiful illusions, was already in the grip of the cancer which was to kill him, but remained in office, supported by a large, well-drilled and (for a few months more) stupidly subservient majority in the House of Commons. The Government was, in September, grudgingly reconstructed to admit of the entry to it, as First Lord of the Admiralty, the post which he had held a quarter of a century earlier at the beginning of World War I, of Winston Churchill, hitherto the

Government's most powerful Conservative critic, and of Anthony Eden, who had resigned as Foreign Secretary early in 1938, as Dominions Secretary. The Labour and Liberal Parties remained firmly, and from their point of view prudently, in opposition. At the beginning of January, just as Auchinleck arrived to take over his command, there was another Cabinet reconstruction. Leslie Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War, who had become highly critical of the General Staff's plans for the conduct of the war in Western Europe, was dismissed (on the curious grounds of 'personal incompatibility' with certain unnamed senior officers) and was replaced by the amiable, keen-witted but essentially pliable Oliver Stanley; and a 'non-political' industrialist, Sir Andrew Duncan, succeeded Stanley at the Board of Trade.

Whatever its political and social implications (Hore-Belisha was never to hold office again), this change was taken in the Army as a clear indication that the forces of tradition had won a major victory over the innovators. It must not be thought that the traditionalists were stubborn or foolish reactionaries; they were honest, courageous and intelligent men who happened to be wrong on a fundamental issue of military thinking. Lord Gort, who was C.I.G.S. until the outbreak of war, then went to France as Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F. and was succeeded at the War Office by General Sir Edmund (later Field-Marshal Lord) Ironside, a genial, shrewd and forthright man of gigantic physical stature. It fell to these two to bear the main shock of the first disasters and retreats, and to demonstrate, in the midst of all the rage and fury, the noblest sides of their natures.

The defects in the conduct of the war, from the outset, stemmed from the top. There was no driving impetus, because there was no glimmer of comprehension of what war was, only a confused distaste and dread. Neville Chamberlain was indeed, as he forlornly proclaimed himself to be, 'a man of peace to the bottom of my heart'. He had no place in war at all. His administration of the war effort, if it could be so described, was a hugger-mugger of peace-time aspirations and intentions mixed with dusty, hastily revived recollections of the latter half of World War I. The feeling of sad emptiness of purpose, hesitancy and irritable self-righteousness which Chamberlain generated seeped down until it became the habitual mood not only of the man or woman in the street, but of too many soldiers and their officers.

It was with this mood that Auchinleck, in common with other commanders, had to contend. Almost as inhibiting were the practical difficulties of building up a major formation from scratch, after years of financial stringency and general neglect. It was a long,

bitterly cold, gloomy winter. Snow lay for weeks at a time, until it was ground into grimy powder by the wheels of guns and vehicles. Small arms clattered with noisy brutality in the numbed hands of raw, red-nosed recruits. Discomforts seemed worse than they were because the majority of those who endured them came from a soft, cosseted civilian life. Soldierly hardness had to be acquired—it is the only way to acquire it—hardly.

Auchinleck noted: 'No one knew anything.' First he was told to establish his headquarters in the Staff College at Camberley, which was echoing, empty, cold and comfortless. Then he moved to an enormous and hideous house in Alresford, called The Grange. He himself put up at The Swan in the village until he could move into a small house called White Railings in the grounds of The Grange. His staff began to take shape, partly Regular, partly Territorial. His B.G.S., Brigadier (later Lieutenant-General Sir James) Gammell, he quickly recognized as keen and knowledgeable; so was his principal administrative officer, Brigadier R. M. Wootten; a well-known landscape artist was his camouflage officer, a G.S.O.3 was a Winchester master who was an experienced Territorial officer. His A.D.C., Captain A. B. Phillpotts, was another Wykehamist and a first cousin of his wife.

There was no lack of work, organizing the staff of Corps H.Q. for war, training, and visiting troops.<sup>1</sup> This in itself was a strenuous operation, since one division was in Dorset, the corps troops—gunners, engineers and other services—were scattered about the southern counties, and the other division (the 52nd Lowland) was in its home country, Peebleshire and the Border Country. 'Not exactly under one's hand' was Auchinleck's comment, and he assessed the 52nd as 'a good division of excellent material, but practically untrained, like all T.A. divisions'. How, he asked himself, could it be otherwise?

Since they were due to go to France in June, Auchinleck, accompanied by his B.G.S., James Gammell, made a preliminary reconnaissance in April. They flew over, called on Lord Gort at his headquarters at Arras, visited the commanders of the two corps then stationed in France, John Dill and Alan Brooke, and went to look at their own allotted sector near Lille. Despite the fact that the B.E.F.'s morale was high, and they were working and training hard, to Auchinleck the atmosphere seemed curiously unreal. They then flew home, and had a very rough passage. The hapless Gammell

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck gave IV Corps the Elephant (black on a white ground) as its formation sign. The Assaye Elephant is one of the battle honours of his own 1/1st Punjab Regiment. IV Corps H.Q. eventually carried the sign back to Assam and Burma in 1943-5.



was extremely sick. This was a malady which did not afflict Auchinleck either in the air or on the sea. He knew this to be a considerable blessing, but sometimes wondered whether being sick would not have been a relief from being frightened—not of enemy action, but of the sea and the air.

Late on the evening of 28 April 1940, Auchinleck was at supper at Alresford when he was ordered to report forthwith to the C.I.G.S.<sup>1</sup> in London. As soon as he reached the War Office he was taken to Ironside's room. The C.I.G.S. in his black dressing-gown loomed hugely between his desk and camp-bed. Tersely, Ironside told Auchinleck that he and part of his staff from IV Corps would be required to go in the immediate future to Narvik, in northern Norway. It was a sudden and dramatic introduction to a situation that was both complex and grave. He and his staff had been for the past three months preparing themselves for war on the Flanders front; now they were switched into the penultimate and final phases of an operation which had been ill-conceived, sketchily planned and far from brilliantly executed, which was doomed within a few days to be swallowed up in a much greater cataclysm, but was itself, on its own scale, a classic example of the kind of disaster which appears to afflict Britain and her allies in the early stages of a great war.

<sup>1</sup> Ironside noted that night in his diary that he had had a tiring day with the Military Co-ordination Committee, trying to work out arrangements about Narvik. He added that he hoped to get Auchinleck there as soon as possible. His own opinion of Auchinleck was favourable. He had been largely instrumental in having him ordered back to England at the beginning of the year. He regarded him as 'the best officer India had, who was not contaminated by too much Indian theory'.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Ponies of Norway

On the evening of Sunday, 28 April 1940, Norway, her previous attitude of rigidly but pathetically correct neutrality having been abandoned in face of the Germans' cold and carefully planned treachery, had been a theatre of war for just three weeks.

On April 9 the Germans occupied Copenhagen and Oslo, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik. The Danish Government capitulated to the invaders, but the Norwegian King and Government, though fugitives, were bravely prepared to resist, they abandoned their neutrality, and appealed to the Allies for help.

On the morning of April 10 the British Cabinet approved the recommendation of its Military Co-ordination Committee, of which the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, was chairman, that such help as could be given to Norway should be concentrated on the capture of Narvik. The committee that afternoon outlined the objectives of such an operation: first, to establish a naval base for the Allies in the far north; and second, to use the port as a military base from which to reach out to the Gallivåre ore fields in Sweden. But as a preliminary, Narvik itself had to be retaken. It was therefore decided to establish an advanced base in the vicinity, 'where the troops could be sorted out with a view to operations against the Germans in Narvik itself'.<sup>1</sup>

During April there were concerted and launched other operations against the Germans in central Norway, planned in haste and executed (by the troops involved) in bewilderment. The story of their adventures and misadventures has been fully told elsewhere, and is not the direct concern of this narrative. The Narvik operation however, at the end of the Norway campaign as at the beginning, was designed to deliver the main blow against the Germans; but as the month of April passed it became dismally obvious that this was faring no better than the so-called 'diversionary' attacks farther south.

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy*, Vol. II, by J. R. M Butler, p. 132.

It began brilliantly enough. On April 10 a force of five British destroyers, commanded by Captain B. A. W. Warburton-Lee, in atrocious weather conditions entered the Ofot Fiord, leading to Narvik, and sank two out of six German destroyers lying there, in addition to an ammunition vessel and six merchantmen, at the cost of one British destroyer sunk and one beached. Three days later a bigger force, consisting of the *Warspite* (carrying the flag of Vice-Admiral W. J. Whitworth), nine destroyers, and aircraft operating from the *Furious*, finished off the job by sinking the remaining German destroyers and one submarine, without the loss of any British ship.

There then remained in or near Narvik a force of some two thousand German soldiers, commanded by Major-General Dietl, a personal friend of Hitler and an expert in mountain warfare, and the 2,500 survivors of the ships' crews. They were cut off from relief by land or sea; they were to some extent supplied by air and by the railway from Sweden, and the Luftwaffe helped them and sustained their morale by frequent and vigorous bomber activity.

This was the force which the British operation—given the code-name 'Rupert'—was intended to dislodge. On April 11 the First Lord of the Admiralty outlined to the Cabinet the plan and the arrangements for implementing it.

The military side of the operation was under the command of Major-General P. J. Mackesy, D.S.O., G.O.C. 49th Division, who as a young officer had served with distinction in the British military mission in southern Russia at the end of World War I, and had recently commanded a brigade in Palestine during the Arab Rebellion. He had in fact already been designated, before the German invasion of Norway, to command the force intended to secure Narvik. Between April 5, when he had his first directive, and April 12, when he sailed from Scapa Flow, General Mackesy received three different sets of orders from London, each cancelling the other out. When he sailed he had only the sketchiest idea of what troops were to be at his disposal, where they were, and how they were armed.

He had with him at Scapa two companies of the Scots Guards and some of his staff; he also had the assistance, in a liaison capacity, of Captain (later Rear-Admiral) L. E. H. Maund, Chief of Staff of the naval force, with which he was to act in close co-operation. The C.I.G.S.'s formal instructions, dated April 10, informed him that his Field Force would consist of the 24th (Guards) Infantry Brigade, which would arrive on the morning of April 16; two T.A. battalions, which would arrive between April 16 and 18; the transport for these units, which would arrive on April 19; the remainder of his own

division, which would reach him on the morning of April 27; the leading echelon of a detachment of French Chasseurs Alps, due to arrive between April 21 and 25; and 'subsequent reinforcements ordered from the B.E.F.'. He was ordered to establish his base at Harstad, a small port with a population of four thousand, on the eastern coast of the island of Hinnøy, some thirty-five miles from Narvik as the crow flies, but separated from it by a long and tricky fiord passage. He was told to ensure the co-operation of such Norwegian forces as were in the area—it was thought that Harstad was the headquarters of a mixed brigade—and obtain the information necessary to plan his further operations. He was explicitly told, 'It is not intended that you should land in the face of opposition,' and, 'The decision whether to land or not will be taken by the Senior Naval Officer in consultation with you. If landing is impossible at Harstad, some other suitable locality should be tried. A landing must be carried out when you have sufficient troops.'<sup>1</sup>

These instructions were handed to General Mackesy at Scapa on April 11 by Brigadier (later Lieutenant-General Sir Otto) Lund, the Deputy Director of Military Operations at the War Office. Brigadier Lund also gave the General a note which the C.I.G.S. had pencilled at half past eleven the night before:

Latest information is that there are three thousand Germans in Narvik. They must have been knocked about by naval action. You will have sufficient troops to allow you to make preliminary preparations and reconnaissances, you yourself being some hours in front of your four Bns with some men. You may be able to work up the Norwegians, if they still exist in any formed body in and around Harstad. Tell them that a large force is coming. There should be considerable numbers of ponies in the village and neighbouring ones. Let no question of paying trouble you . . . don't allow any haggling over prices. You may have a chance of taking advantage of naval action and you should do so if you can. Boldness is required. . . . Good luck to you. We know your responsibility and trust you.'<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile it had been decided that the designated naval commander of the Narvik expedition, Admiral Sir Edward Evans,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway*, by T. K. Derry p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 248-9.

<sup>3</sup> Subsequently Admiral of the Fleet Lord Mountevans (Evans of the *Broke*).

should be replaced by Admiral of the Fleet the Earl of Cork and Orrery. Lord Cork, who had lately given up the post of C.-in-C. Portsmouth, was an able officer, a vigorous and colourful personality, who was senior in rank to the C.-in-C. Home Fleet; he enjoyed the personal friendship and esteem of the First Lord, and throughout the winter of 1939-40 had been concerned, with him, in the plan called 'Catherine', a scheme for forcing an entry by surface ships into the Baltic. Lord Cork received no written orders, but was briefed in his task on April 10 and 11 'with varying degrees of informality by the First Sea Lord, by a meeting of the Military Co-ordination Committee, and by the First Lord in his car travelling from the Admiralty to the House of Commons'.<sup>1</sup> The force assigned to him consisted of seven cruisers, two of them only until the troops had been landed, one net-layer (also on temporary duty) and five destroyers.

The Admiral and the General had not met in London before they set off, and only the sketchiest attempt had been made to co-ordinate the orders issued to them. The General 'arrived in the Narvik area', as he phrased it in his subsequent report, on April 14, in H.M.S. *Southampton*. In fact the cruiser lay that day in the Vågs Fiord, a wide sea-loch to the north-east of the island of Hinnøy. The two Scots Guards' companies, who were the only troops that the General had with him, went ashore that afternoon, and established contact with the 6th Norwegian Division, commanded by Major-General Fleischer, operating in this area. Harstad, it was ascertained, was not occupied by the enemy.

Lord Cork, in the cruiser *Aurora*, reached Skjel Fiord, near the southern extremity of the Lofoten Islands and more than a hundred miles to the south-west of Narvik, about eight o'clock on the evening of April 14. The original intention of proceeding to Harstad had been abandoned, because a signal had been received from Admiral Whitworth in the *Warspite*, despatched immediately after his successful assault on the German ships in the waters near Narvik on the previous day. Whitworth said: 'I am convinced that Narvik can be taken by direct assault now without serious opposition on landing.' Lord Cork sought to act at once; he signalled immediately, '*Aurora* and *Southampton* are to arrive at Skjel Fiord by 20.00 today, Sunday.' Unfortunately signalling conditions were so bad that this order was not received by the *Southampton* until it was too late to act upon it; but what Lord Cork intended to do was to put ashore at Narvik the two companies of the Scots Guards from the *Southampton*,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

together with marines and seamen from the *Aurora*, the *Warspite*, the *Southampton* and the temporarily disabled British ships in the vicinity. He might thus have taken Narvik with a bold, quick *coup* on the night of Sunday, April 14.

The opportunity passed. It was not until the morning of April 15 that the *Aurora* and the *Southampton* met in And Fiord, to the north-west of Vågs Fiord. By this time the troop convoy carrying the rest of 24th (Guards) Brigade had also arrived. Throughout the 15th and into the 16th the troops disembarked at Harstad; and on both days they were bombed by German aircraft, whose presence showed quite clearly that any initial advantage of surprise had been lost, though they inflicted no damage by their attacks. The troopships sailed for home in the early hours of April 17.

Meanwhile, the confusion in which the operation had been launched showed its first effects. Lord Cork said in his despatch:

On April 15 I met General Mackesy for the first time and was astonished to hear that not only was his force embarked as for a peaceful landing and consequently was unready for immediate operations but that the orders he had received, and given to him just prior to sailing, ruled out any idea of an opposed landing. Thus the General and myself left the U.K. with diametrically opposite views as to what was required.<sup>1</sup>

Lord Cork still hoped to take Narvik by a rapid assault. General Mackesy and his staff held to the view that an early assault was impracticable; the enemy were in position, the lie of the land was quite unsuitable, there were no proper landing-craft, and the bleak landscape still lay under a heavy canopy of snow. Their opinion was supported by that of Lord Cork's Chief of Staff, Captain Maund, who was an expert in the organization of combined operations.

Even before any decision was made, on April 15 there reached Lord Cork from the Admiralty a message containing the sentence: 'We think it imperative that you and the General should be together and act together and that no attack should be made except in concert.'

Well-meant as this advice was, it was not easy to act upon. Differences of opinion were exacerbated by differences of temperament between the Admiral and General Mackesy. This difficulty was not resolved so long as General Mackesy held his appointment. There therefore followed what seemed to those watching from afar

<sup>1</sup> *Supplement to the London Gazette*, Cmd. 38011 of 10 July 1947, *Norway Campaign 1940*, p. 2.

in London a fortnight of inexplicable and infuriating delays and frustrations.

But the faults were by no means all at one end. Strategically there was sudden change after change in the plans. The Prime Minister, for example, thought that it was essential, for prestige reasons, to capture Trondheim; distinguished generals, like Carton de Wiart and Bernard Paget, were despatched, post haste, to various parts of central Norway, inadequately briefed and deluged with contradictory orders. The tactical and administrative chaos inflicted on the hard-pressed commanders and men (of all three Services) at Narvik only reflected that which pertained in the strategic sphere. Their experience was not unique, but it was notably disillusioning; and the situation which faced Auchinleck when eventually he arrived in northern Norway is only explicable if this experience is taken into account.

In a stormy anchorage, off a small port used in normal times only by light coastal vessels of shallow draught, there gathered a large, unwieldy assemblage of ships. They were far too big and far too many for the minimal facilities which Harstad offered.

Three big transports, escorted by the battleship *Valiant* and nine destroyers, arrived off Harstad on the morning of April 15. The 1st Irish Guards, 1st Scots Guards (less two companies which had embarked with General Mackesy in the *Southampton*) and Brigade Headquarters landed the same day, as did the 3rd Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, R.A., but without its guns. The 2nd South Wales Borderers landed on the 16th. The size of the force was doubled, however, by the number of divisional, base, and lines-of-communication troops, including a railway construction company intended for use at Narvik. Unloading of the transports and clearing of the quays were completed by the 17th and 18th respectively but the confusion of the start had its counterpart in a more complete confusion in the arrival. The convoy had not been loaded tactically, so that every cargo had to be sorted on landing and some items even re-dispatched to Namsos.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the troops had three kit-bags per man, to carry their seventeen items of special clothing—thirty-five pieces in all—scale of issue as for winter garrison in Tientsin, plus items got ready for Finland.

<sup>1</sup> Two hundred and fifty miles to the south, whence it was hoped to deliver one prong of the assault on Trondheim. This expedition and its counterpart at Aandalsnes, to the south of Trondheim, had both met with 'serious and partly unexpected military reverses'. *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway* by T. K. Derry, p. 129.

No motor transport had accompanied the first flight of the expedition, originally designed for Narvik and the railway, and local hirings could not meet the need for road movement as the troops went farther afield.<sup>1</sup> The Irish Guards received their trucks in time to push them into the sea, unused, for want of cargo space at the final evacuation. On April 21 the general congestion was still so great that the men of a large labour force, which was included in 1,141 new arrivals, were by General Mackesy's orders sent home in the ship which had just brought them.<sup>2</sup>

This was a chaos for which General Mackesy—whatever faults may be alleged against him as a commander—bore no responsibility, which he had neither the authority nor the capacity to control. He and his men could only suffer, strive (perhaps unsuccessfully) to produce order, fight and die.

Yet on April 17 the First Lord of the Admiralty, on receipt of what he described as 'disappointing news' from Narvik (a signal from Lord Cork reporting General Mackesy's unwillingness to attempt an immediate assault on the town protected by the close-range bombardment of the Fleet), stated the situation in these terms to the Military Co-ordination Committee:

Lord Cork's telegram shows that General Mackesy proposes to take two unoccupied positions on the approaches to Narvik and to hold on there until the snow melts perhaps at the end of the month. The General expects that the first demi-brigade of Chasseurs Alpins will be sent to him, which it certainly will not be. This policy means that we shall be held up in front of Narvik for several weeks. Meanwhile the Germans will proclaim that we are brought to a standstill and that Narvik is still in their possession. The effects of this will be damaging both upon Norwegians and neutrals. Moreover, the German fortification of Narvik will

<sup>1</sup> So much for the C.I.G.S.'s forlornly optimistic little line about ponies and no haggling about the price.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 149. This paragraph has been quoted in full because it records, factually and with no exaggeration, the administrative conditions under which the military commanders in Norway, their staffs and the men under their command were faced. Whatever strictures are made on the conduct of commanders or men, the unpreparedness which preceded and the blunders which accompanied all that they did and all that they endured must be recorded too. Within the lifespan of Claude Auchinleck, Norway echoed, with ironic similarity but a quarter of a century later, the experience of Mesopotamia.



continue, requiring a greater effort when the time comes. This information is at once unexpected and disagreeable. One of the best regular brigades in the Army will be wasting away, losing men by sickness and playing no part. It is for consideration whether a telegram on the following lines should not be sent to Lord Cork and General Mackesy:

'Your proposals involve damaging deadlock at Narvik and the neutralization of one of our best brigades. We cannot send you the Chasseurs Alpains. The *Warspite* will be needed elsewhere in two or three days. Full consideration should therefore be given by you to an assault upon Narvik covered by the *Warspite* and the destroyers, which might also operate at Rømbaks Fiord. The capture of the port and town would be an important success. We should like to receive from you the reasons why this is not possible, and your estimate of the degree of resistance to be expected on the water-front. Matter most urgent.'<sup>1</sup>

This telegram was agreed to by the committee and sent. The results were a conference between Lord Cork and General Mackesy, and the General's reluctant agreement to have troops ready for a landing if the effects of a naval bombardment satisfied him that the task was feasible. Then General Mackesy set out on a personal reconnaissance of Narvik in the *Aurora*. He returned to Harstad on April 20, and signalled to the C.I.G.S.:

Owing to the nature of the ground, flat trajectory of naval guns, and the impossibility of locating the concealed machine-guns, I am convinced that the naval bombardment cannot be militarily effective, and that a landing from open boats in the above conditions must be ruled out absolutely. Any attempt of the sort would involve *not* the neutralization but the destruction of the 24th (Guards) Brigade.<sup>2</sup>

From April 20 onwards there was an increase in the frequency of the blizzards; and when the indomitable Lord Cork, accompanied by a section of Marines, himself tested out the General's assertion that the snow was a really serious obstacle, he agreed that it was 'easy to sink to one's waist, and to make any progress was exhausting'.

On April 20 it was decided in London to place Lord Cork in

<sup>1</sup> *The Second World War* by Winston S. Churchill, Vol. I, p. 486.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway* by T. K. Derry, p. 153.

sole command of the operations, and the signal confirming the appointment reached him on April 21. He then took the final decision not to attempt an opposed landing at Narvik but to try to induce the enemy to surrender by an intensive naval bombardment, and only send troops ashore when a white flag had been displayed. Three days later therefore, in heavy and continuous snow, the *Effingham*, the *Warspite*, the cruisers *Aurora* and *Enterprise*, and the destroyer *Zulu* shelled military objectives in Narvik for three hours. A good deal of destruction was caused, but no flag of surrender appeared. So bad was the weather that no aircraft could take off either from the British carrier *Furious* or from the German-controlled landing-grounds in Norway.

Despite Churchill's threats to the contrary, the 27th Demi-Brigade of Chasseurs Alpins, under the command of General Béthouart, left Scapa Flow for Norway on April 24, due to arrive in the area of operations on April 28. These valuable reinforcements gave an opportunity for the commanders to put into action General Mackesy's original alternative to the frontal assault on Narvik. This was to organize an advance by land against the Narvik peninsula from all three sides, so as to take both Akenes and Öyjord and cut the railway at Hundalen, only eight miles from the Swedish frontier, causing Narvik to fall into Allied hands eventually 'like a ripe plum'.<sup>1</sup>

Operations along these lines were accordingly initiated on April 28. Meanwhile, Allied operations in central Norway having failed and been abandoned, the indications were multiplying that the Germans were pushing northwards at considerable speed, regardless of weather and road conditions, encountering only sporadic Norwegian resistance, and that therefore they might be able to relieve the garrison in Narvik, take the offensive against the Allies and bring about yet another Allied defeat and retreat.

\* \* \*

So far, therefore, had the situation developed when it was decided to send out Auchinleck. There was far from complete or sympathetic understanding of its complexities and difficulties in London, though keen appreciation of, and lively apprehension about, the political effects of any new calamity in Norway. It is difficult to discover any logical or coherent intention underlying the decision to appoint Auchinleck. Once Churchill had procured

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 155.

agreement to the appointment of Lord Cork, General Mackesy communicated thereafter with the War Office on administrative matters only. Neither the dramatic speed-up in the pace of operations nor the capture of Narvik, which had been hoped for, had occurred. The resulting sense of frustration prompted a restless, eager search for new moves, new methods, new men.

Few at the centre of authority at this time were entirely immune from this infection. The meetings of the Military Co-ordination Committee were steeped in it, though few practical results flowed therefrom. Neville Chamberlain felt that Churchill drove the Service advisers too hard, and when he resumed the chairmanship of the committee in mid-April he decided to 'double-bank' the hard-pressed Chiefs of Staff by the employment of three Vice-Chiefs. The three appointed were Vice-Admiral Tom Phillips, General Sir John Dill (who was brought back from commanding a corps in France, because the Prime Minister had long wished to have his able brain at headquarters) and Air Marshal Richard Peirse. They acted as substitutes for their chiefs when these were absent, and also relieved them of some of the burden of departmental work. Meetings of the Vice-Chiefs counted equally as meetings of the C.O.S. Committee; the first of such meetings was held on Tuesday, April 27.

No documentary record exists to show that General Dill formally proposed that Auchinleck should be sent to Norway. But it is clearly established that Dill had the highest professional and personal regard for Auchinleck; and it is significant that, after his first interview with Ironside, all Auchinleck's communications with the General Staff at the War Office, both before and after he left for the theatre of operations, were made to Dill, and Dill's pencilled annotations are on the typewritten copy of Auchinleck's preliminary appreciation of his task.

Five days elapsed between the nocturnal interview with Ironside and the submission of this appreciation. They were certainly not spent in idleness or unnecessary delay. In his despatch,<sup>1</sup> submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 19 June 1940, Auchinleck said:

I returned to my headquarters at Alresford and arranged for an advanced headquarters to be established in the War Office. For the next week my staff were fully employed collecting and collating information concerning northern Norway and the existing situation in that theatre. In this task they received every possible

<sup>1</sup> Cmd. 38011 of 10 July 1947.

assistance from the staff of the different departments and branches of the War Office.

On the morning of Monday, April 29, Brigadier Gammell, Auchinleck's B.G.S., summoned about a dozen officers to White Railings and told them that they were to be fitted for battle-dress and to report at the War Office on the following morning, or the day after that at the latest. One of these officers was the G.S.O.3 (I), Captain W. R. P. Ridgway; the battle-dress with which he was issued needed substantial alteration; he hurried in with it to his own tailor at Winchester, eight miles away, and this scrupulously careful craftsman, having done what was required, stitched his own label to the lining of the battle-dress blouse. This label was to prove of quaint significance later.

By Wednesday morning, May 1, the small advance party had assembled at the War Office. The Intelligence staff set about collecting information about northern Norway. On Thursday they were able to produce two detailed papers, one on the climatic conditions, the other on the roads leading towards the Bodo-Narvik-Tromsø area from the south and from the east. But it was a narrow squeak, for there was almost a total dearth of maps of the area, and a complete absence of reliable information.

A civilian who spoke Norwegian and Swedish was run to earth. Someone found one of the few tourists' maps of Norway which had not fallen into the hands of the organizers of previous expeditions to Aandsnes and Namsos far to the south. Someone else procured copies of the guide-books issued by the Norwegian and Swedish Automobile Associations. Traces were made from these sources and the results co-ordinated and analysed. A complication, however, was introduced when Brigadier Wootten, the D.A. & Q.M.G., aware of the size of the staff that would ultimately assemble in Norway, suggested that it would be necessary to find a place with an hotel or other big building capable of housing H.Q. During Friday afternoon it was discovered that there existed a book called *The Norway Pilot*, which was obtainable through the Admiralty. The War Office got in touch with the Admiralty's publications branch. An amiable voice said: 'Not a hope, old boy. You see, the book would have to come from our store out at Willesden, and they close at twelve o'clock on Saturday. I tell you what—I'll see you get it on Monday.'

Captain Ridgway, before going to IV Corps, had been in the War Office, as an assistant to Major (later Major-General Sir Francis) de Guingand, one of the personal military advisers to the

then Secretary of State, Mr. Leslie Hore-Belisha. He was thus on terms of personal friendship with the Minister's Private Secretary, Mr. (later Sir) David Roseway. He sought Roseway's assistance, and from his room rang up his opposite number in the Admiralty. A few minutes later Ridgway walked out of the room of the First Lord's Private Secretary carrying, in some triumph, the First Lord's personal copy of the book 'on loan'. In the corridor he encountered a Winchester neighbour, Commander Collins, who asked what brought him to the Admiralty. Swearing Collins to secrecy, Ridgway told him about his difficulty over *The Norway Pilot*. Collins forthwith took him to a room in which there was a whole shelf lined with copies of the book. Ridgway took one, returned the First Lord's, and went back to his desk. 'I failed to find a suitable hotel,' he said, 'but there was a lot of very valuable information.'

While these flurries were going on in the lower echelons, Auchinleck himself prepared his own appreciation, which was in Dill's hands on May 3. It took note of several new developments and of new factors which had emerged since April 28. The Allies were by now out of the whole of southern and central Norway, but it was still hoped that some part of the north could be held against the enemy, and Narvik itself and access to the Swedish iron-ore fields were still regarded as vital.

But where and how could the German advance northwards be checked? In the deeply indented coastline south of Narvik there were three small ports which were potential points of resistance: Bodo, some 120-30 miles south-south-west of Narvik; Mo, sixty miles due south of Bodo; and Mosjøen, forty miles south-west of Mo (fifty-four by road). Bodo was on the north shore of the long sea-loch called the Salt Fiord; Mo, at the mouth of the River Rana, was the terminus of the northernmost road running from Sweden to the Norwegian coast; and Mosjøen, at the head of the Vefsen Fiord, was the terminus of the railway line which ran due north from Namsos. On April 29 orders were issued to General Mackesy to detach a company of the Scots Guards to hold Bodo. This movement was carried out on the following day. Meanwhile *en route* to this area, while Auchinleck was making his own preparations, were five small units, called Independent Companies, whose role and purpose need some explanation. For their destined part in the operation they were described by the code-name of 'Scissorsforce', and were commanded by Acting Colonel (later Major-General Sir Colin) Gubbins, a resolute and independent-minded ex-gunner. Ten Independent Companies had been raised earlier in the month, and five were now ready to go overseas. They were all volunteers and except for the officers, who

included a small number of Indian Army and British Service Regulars, they were drawn entirely from the Territorial Army. The total strength of each company was twenty officers and 270 other ranks; they were subdivided into three platoons of three sections each, with an officer in command of every section. 'Their war establishment included sappers, signals, a support section of four Bren guns and, last but not least, some Norwegian interpreters. For the essential feature of the Independent Company was its ability to operate throughout as a self-contained unit based on the country in which it found itself. They had no transport of their own, though the intention had been to allocate some trawlers and drifters to their exclusive use. Equipment included Alpine rucksacks, snowshoes, Arctic boots, sheepskin coats, and a five-day mountain ration of pemmican. It also included £4,000 to each company in hard cash.'<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Gubbins's instructions were issued to him from Headquarters N.W.E.F., Nobel House, on May 2. He was told: 'Your first task is to prevent the Germans occupying Bodo, Mo and Mosjøen. This they may try to do by small parties landed from the sea or dropped by parachute.'<sup>2</sup> He was bidden to refrain from prolonged frontal resistance to any German advance, but to harry the enemy's flanks and lines of communication. The last item of his instructions informed him that eight Indian Army officers had been allotted to him for employment as he thought fit, and that the fullest use should be made of their knowledge and experience of irregular warfare in mountainous country.

No. 1 Independent Company had already sailed for Mo when these instructions were issued. Nos. 3, 4 and 5 Independent Companies, together with a headquarters roughly equivalent to that of an infantry brigade, were due to leave the Clyde on the morning of May 4. Meanwhile, Lord Cork was being given by General Mackesy numerous military reasons why a renewed frontal assault on Narvik itself was impossible, which he forwarded to London with admitted reluctance. Auchinleck surveyed the situation in the light of every factor that was known to the War Office. His appreciation was briefly phrased and impeccable, but he summarized his conclusions in four bleak, realistic questions:

(1) Narvik port and the railway may not be available for the transport of ore, troops or supplies for six months or more?

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway*, by T. K. Derry, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Appendix A, p. 258.

(2) Unless Narvik is essential from an ore point of view is it necessary to go there at all?

(3) If not, cannot a better defended anchorage be found farther south?

(4) If so, should not every effort be made now to obtain such an anchorage combined with an air and army base?

The V.C.I.G.S., though he had freely annotated the earlier part of the appreciation on points of detail, made no comment at all on these four vital questions. There is no evidence to show that they were even put to the Military Co-ordination Committee. Had they been seriously considered, the last melancholy phases of the Norway catastrophe might have been different. They were brushed aside. Narvik by now was one of those commitments—there were to be others later in the war—in the consideration of which political factors, and factors of popular prestige, were permitted to outweigh the sheerly military factor.

On the following day, Saturday, May 4, Auchinleck submitted a note on his military requirements if he were properly to carry out the task with which he was being charged. He pointed out that of the units which it was proposed eventually to send to Narvik or its vicinity only one seventh would be British, and that this might make it difficult for him to exercise command as freely as might be required. He advocated that the proportion of British troops should be increased as soon as possible. He noted the existence of the Independent Companies, and assumed that they would come under his command, since their operations were an essential part of the general plan for the defence of the Narvik area. He also assumed—it was one of the boldest assumptions he ever made—that 144 heavy A.A. and 144 light A.A. guns would be provided.

He then detailed the forces which he believed to be necessary for the defence of the Narvik area (exclusive of the Independent Companies). He stressed the fact that his estimate was 'extremely theoretical'. But it was a formidable list:

One divisional cavalry or light tank regiment.

One or two squadrons of armoured cars.

Three or four companies of mounted infantry (e.g., the Lovat Scouts).

Five batteries of field or mountain artillery.

One or two medium howitzer batteries.

Four field companies of engineers (exclusive of engineers for construction work).

Twelve infantry battalions (four brigade commands).  
One machine-gun battalion.

When he turned to the air requirements, he dealt only with landing grounds, but said that his intention was to establish and protect at least three landing grounds from which fighters and bombers could co-operate in the defence of the occupied area: one at Bardufoss,<sup>1</sup> north-east of Narvik, one near Harstad or in the area Harstad-Narvik, and one at or near Bodo.

'Extremely theoretical' as it was, Auchinleck's estimate of the manpower required had no chance of being complied with, even in the circumstances prevailing at the beginning of May, and regardless of later, calamitous events. It was unfortunate in that it laid the foundations of a serious and persistent misapprehension of Auchinleck's character and qualities. Sir Winston Churchill, who maintained a close, supervisory interest in the Norway campaign as a whole, both while he was First Lord of the Admiralty and after he became Prime Minister, has said in his memoirs that Auchinleck 'asked for very large additions to bring his force up to seventeen battalions, two hundred heavy and light A.A. guns and four squadrons of aircraft. It was only possible to promise about half these requirements.'<sup>2</sup>

Even so, that was a promise which could never have been fulfilled. The First Lord's restless interest in Narvik was unabated. During the course of this preparatory week he saw Auchinleck more than once, and at one of their later meetings remarked, 'I thought you were on your way, General.'

Auchinleck answered that he was awaiting definite written orders, without which he did not propose to go. On May 5 those orders were given to him by the Secretary of State for War, Oliver Stanley. As set out in the Official History they read:

1. The object of His Majesty's Government in northern Norway is to secure and maintain a base in northern Norway from which we can:

- (a) Deny iron ore supplies to Germany via Narvik.
- (b) Interfere so far as may be possible with ore supplies to Germany via Lulea.

<sup>1</sup> A detailed and most amusing account of the reconnaissance for and the establishment of the Bardufoss landing ground was given by the wing-commander in charge of it in *Blackwood's*, No. 1504, of February 1941.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. I, p. 515.



(c) Preserve a part of Norway as a seat of Government for the Norwegian King and people.

2. As a first stage in the achievement of this object, operations are now in progress for the capture of Narvik. The present forces assembled for this purpose are under the command of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cork and Orrery; the Military Commander, Major-General Mackesy, being subordinate to him.

3. It is the intention of His Majesty's Government that there should be no interference with the existing plans of Lord Cork and Orrery until they have either achieved success or been abandoned. At some future date, however, it will be necessary to revert to the normal system of command.

4. You are appointed G.O.C.-in-C. Designate of the Anglo-French Military Forces and the British Air Component in this area. His Majesty's Government will decide when the present system of unified command shall terminate. Thereafter you will be in independent command of the Anglo-French Military Forces and the British Air Component and will act in close co-operation with the Senior Naval Officer in the Narvik area.

5. You will proceed to the Narvik area with an officer detailed by the Chief of the Air Staff, and, in conjunction with Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cork and Orrery, report for the information of the Chiefs of Staff the forces required to attain the object in paragraph 1 above and the area which you recommend should be occupied. You should take into account the necessity for making arrangements to enable any iron ore now at Narvik to be despatched to the United Kingdom, and, if the situation permits, for resuming the supply of iron ore from the Swedish iron mines at Gällivare.

Your report should include recommendations as to the practicability and desirability of repairing the railway from Narvik to the Swedish frontier.

#### SCALE OF ENEMY ATTACK UP TO OCTOBER 1940

##### *Naval*

6. The scale of naval attack that may be expected against Narvik is:

(a) Raids by capital ships or cruisers which, although not very likely, are a possibility.

(b) A heavy scale of submarine attack by both torpedo and mine.

(c) Light craft and M.T.B. attack. Germany will probably take full advantage of such measure of control as she may be

able to obtain over Norwegian waters to secure the approach of attacking light craft.

## *Land*

The scale of land attack that may be expected is:

- (a) Raids or attempted landings by parties carried in coastal vessels.
- (b) Sabotage, especially of the railway.
- (c) Parachute landings.
- (d) A German advance from Sweden following invasion of that country.

## *Air*

The Narvik area is within reach of German bombers based on or refuelled in southern or central Norway. A daily weight of attack of forty tons is possible from these bases from now onwards.

To this must be added a light scale of attack from seaplanes operating from fiords. The scale and frequency of this attack would be very seriously increased if the Germans succeed in establishing air bases in Sweden, such as Boden (near Lulea) and Ostersund, or farther north in Norway.

To meet this scale the Chiefs of Staff estimate that two or three fighter squadrons, one bomber servicing unit and some Army co-operation aircraft are required.

7. When you have taken over command it is intended to withdraw Major-General Mackesy and the Staff of the 49th Divisional Headquarters, less such personnel as you may wish to retain.

8. The forces operating in Norway south of the Narvik area, at present under the command of Lieutenant-General Massy, may at an early date be placed under your command.

9. Should you become a casualty or otherwise be prevented from exercising command of your force, command of the Anglo-French land and air forces will pass to a British officer to be nominated by you until another British officer can be appointed. This officer will be given the acting rank of lieutenant-general.

10. You will act in co-operation with the Norwegian Commander-in-Chief.

11. You will maintain constant communication with the War Office.

(Signed) OLIVER STANLEY.

Detailed as these orders were, there was a vital omission. What was to be done about General Mackesy? Auchinleck was given a further most secret and personal document, signed by General Dill, the V.C.I.G.S. It read:

With reference to paragraphs 3 and 4 of your instructions. It is the intention that you should take over command of the Anglo-French forces at the same time that His Majesty's Government decides that the system of unified command is to cease.

If, however, when you arrive in the Narvik area you consider that local conditions necessitate, you may assume command of the Anglo-French troops, thus placing yourself under Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cork and Orrery for as long as His Majesty's Government decide that a single commander is necessary.

This document was also dated Sunday, May 5. On the Monday morning a final list of administrative points was discussed between the General Staff branches at the War Office and Auchinleck's headquarters staff—they still described themselves as H.Q. IV Corps—and agreed in a document signed by Brigadier Gammell. Brigadier Lund, the D.D.M.O., despatched a most immediate and personal signal to Lord Cork and General Mackesy:

Lieutenant-General Auchinleck is commander designate of the Anglo-French forces in northern Norway. It is the intention of H.M.G. that there shall be no interference with the existing plans for the capture of Narvik until these plans have either achieved success or been abandoned. Auchinleck arrived Narvik area about May 11 with instructions to report in conjunction with Lord Cork on requirements to secure and maintain a base in northern Norway.

In a basement room under the western arch of the Horse Guards, officers and other ranks were fitted out with Arctic kit. Auchinleck described it as 'an enormous bundle of super-thick clothing, most of which one never used'. Ridgway said: 'We were provided with every known useful and useless article of equipment which was stuffed into kitbags and handed over to the batmen. . . . When we drew alongside the quay at Harstad we were dressed up like members of the Shackleton expedition.'

Auchinleck and his staff were due to go north on the night of Monday, May 6, to embark the following day. During that Monday morning Brigadier Gammell discovered that the transport in which they were to travel to Harstad, the Polish liner *Chrobry*, would be receiving signals via one of the two destroyers escorting her, but would not be making signals; and there would be no cipher officer. A rather dazed Captain Ridgway therefore spent the rest of Monday learning how to decipher coded telegrams.

The party duly assembled that evening, half at Euston and half at King's Cross. The piles of Arctic kit were heaped around them, and a number of boxes holding various necessitics, not all of a strictly military character, which the despatchers, in defiance of rigorous security instructions, had boldly labelled 'Lieutenant-General C. J. Auchinleck'. Next day in the *Chrobry*, lying at the quayside in Leith, Auchinleck said good-bye to his wife, and the liner slipped out northwards with her escort of destroyers. It was Tuesday, May 7.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### In and out of Narvik

THE *Chrobry* was at sea from May 7 to May 11. They were four days of the most crucial and far-reaching significance in the history of the war, politically as well as militarily. The events of these ninety-six hours were to have the gravest impact on the conduct of the campaign in northern Norway, and on Auchinleck's subsequent career. It is not without irony that they occurred while he was out of touch, able to receive messages but to send none in reply. In his despatch he described the voyage as 'uneventful'. The ship was crowded with troops; it was cold and rough. His D.D.M.S., Colonel (later Major-General) Mitchener, had raging toothache, and there was no dentist on board. The hapless amateur cipher officer battled with a spate of signals, his task, and that of the yeoman of signals on the *Chrobry's* bridge, made no easier by the fact that every time the destroyer, transmitting them by lamp, encountered a heavy sea, she disappeared entirely in the trough of the waves.

Meanwhile in London, as the result of a tense and often dramatic two-day debate in the Commons on the conduct of the Norway campaign, a major political crisis developed. On the morning of 10 May 1940 the Germans launched their assault on the Low Countries; and that evening Neville Chamberlain resigned as Prime Minister and was succeeded by Winston Churchill. The internal political crisis merged at once into the vast military challenge. The period of the 'twilight war' ended in the fiery blaze of the *blitzkrieg*.

When Auchinleck embarked at Leith on the Tuesday, he—and those who sent him—believed that he was going to command a large and growing force in the only theatre of land warfare in which the enemy were being actively engaged. When he reached Harstad on the Saturday, it was to take over command of what was to seem a remote and secondary side-show.

From the moment that he arrived there, Auchinleck's task in northern Norway was in essence a tidying-up operation. He was on Norwegian soil for just under four weeks, from Saturday, May 11 until Friday, June 7. This period, like his four days at sea, coincided

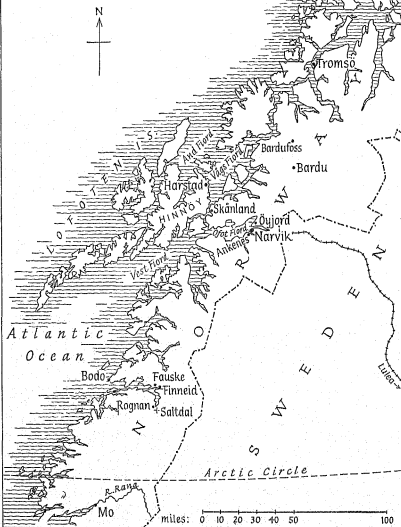
with a series of crucial events far to the south—the German over-running of the Low Countries, the Battle of France, the B.E.F.'s fighting withdrawal and evacuation from Dunkirk—and every major decision made in this distant theatre of war was governed by what was happening in Flanders, in Paris and in London. But since the attention of the Prime Minister, the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff was so sternly concentrated on these grave matters close at hand, the commanders in northern Norway were, to a considerable degree, left to fend for themselves—to make their own decisions and issue their own orders. Auchinleck had no deluge of long, admonitory or exhaustively interrogatory telegrams to deal with; his subsequent experience in another theatre of war was, as will be seen, somewhat different.

The *Chrobry* came to anchor off Harstad on the morning of Saturday, May 11. There was no obvious indication that the arrival of the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Designate was expected. Auchinleck went ashore after breakfast with his A.D.C., Captain Phillpotts. Others of the staff, looking a good deal less imposing, followed later. Their appearance, it must be admitted, was not improved by the fact that, since they left London, the belated northern spring had arrived and a sharp thaw had set in. They waddled ashore, dressed as for the long Polar night, and were met by an A.P.M. wearing a battle-dress blouse and a kilt. One by one the massive outer coverings were removed and handed to the waiting batmen under the bleak gaze of the A.P.M. This officer, grimly conscious of his security responsibilities, was suspicious of their *bona fides*. True, they had not parachuted down dressed as nuns, but it was his duty to be careful. Ridgway established his identity by opening his battle-dress and exhibiting the label sewn inside it by his Winchester tailor, which appeared to satisfy the A.P.M.

Auchinleck found General Mackesy in his quarters with his G.S.O.1, Colonel (later Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur) Dowler. Auchinleck had known Mackesy when the latter was an instructor at the Staff College at Quetta, and had a high opinion of his intelligence, knowledge and ability. Dowler's and Auchinleck's paths were to cross more than once in the future; Dowler, known to countless regular and temporary officers as 'Pop', was a well-loved and most capable officer. Mackesy told Auchinleck that he himself had been ill but was now recovered. Auchinleck explained to Mackesy that he was there in an exploratory capacity, with instructions to report to the Chiefs of Staff on the situation, existing and potential, in northern Norway. Mackesy was completely helpful and informative and set out the situation as he saw it. He outlined his

# NORTHERN NORWAY

Arctic  
Ocean



plans for the future, which seemed to Auchinleck perfectly sound and geared to the extremely difficult conditions of the theatre of war.

The only curious factor was that, as Mackesy pointed out, Lord Cork, the Supreme Commander, was in his flagship, the *Effingham*, at her anchorage at Skånland, preparing to sail early on the morrow in order to direct a landing operation by the French contingent at Bjervik, at the head of the Herjangs Fiord. Auchinleck lunched with Mackesy, and decided that the sooner he saw Lord Cork the better. Accompanied by Gammell, his B.G.S., he set off, first by car and then by Royal Naval launch, the latter in the hands of a youthful but very tough midshipman. For several hours the launch chugged up the cold, gloomy fiords on its uncomfortable and at times frightening journey.<sup>1</sup>

It was night by the time they reached the *Effingham* and met Lord Cork. From the first Auchinleck liked and got on well with the Admiral, who had a considerable reputation, inside and outside the Royal Navy, as a fire-eater. Auchinleck explained his position to Lord Cork, who accepted it composedly and in return gave Auchinleck his assessment of the position. He had set it down formally on paper, and the document survived:

The position as I see it in the light of recent events is:

The forces in the Narvik area are sufficient for the moment. With what is now here the frontier could well be established at the Vest, Ofot and Rømbaks Fiords, leaving only some twenty miles of land frontier to the Swedish frontier.

The position at Bodo could be held to deny enemy possible aerodrome sites, but by gaining Namsos a nearly completed aerodrome has been acquired.

With the development of aerodromes at Bardufoss, Skånland and Banak (Porsanger) however, the situation could no doubt be kept in hand and the frontier stabilized from the south.

An additional force, however, will be required to watch the approaches from Murmansk and, if the neutrality of Sweden is violated, the frontier of that country.

The actual town of Narvik is of no material value, everything of potential use has been destroyed, the harbour is blocked with wrecks which would take some months to clear.

Nor if Hundalen is in our hands can the railway be used by the enemy.

The value of Narvik from a political point of view is high, in

<sup>1</sup> 'I am not brave in small boats,' said Auchinleck long afterwards.



the opinion of H.M. Government, and the desire to occupy it great. I should like to make a determined attempt to bring this about.

My views on the subject are known. It could, in my opinion be carried out with some loss.

The contrary opinion, however, is very strong, so much so that I feel it would be hopeless to attempt it with the British troops.

However devotedly the duty might be carried out, the necessary optimism to ensure success would be lacking.

This is not meant as a reflection on anybody; to go into any trial of strength believing you are foredoomed to failure is half-way to that result.

The development of the enemy's air power, which will increase considerably in a few weeks as a result of the enemy's gain of the Namsos area does introduce an additional difficulty which cannot be ignored.

My recommendation is that the present military movements continue, and by them, in time Narvik will be neutralized if not evacuated, and the line Hundalen-Swedish frontier established.

That the Navy should guarantee the safety of the water frontier—Narvik to the extreme Western entrance to the Vest Fiord, and the Army assisted by some Naval units maintain an advanced position in the Bodo area.

It was now transparently clear to Auchinleck that he would have to act as soon as possible on the secret directive issued to him by General Dill before he left London. Neither General Mackesy nor any member of his staff was on board the *Effingham*. Whoever originally had been at fault, it was obvious that the personal relationship between Lord Cork and General Mackesy was such that it was most unlikely for them to be able to co-operate to the requisite degree. Auchinleck, therefore, told Lord Cork that he proposed to take over from General Mackesy as soon as this current operation was over. Lord Cork unhesitatingly concurred in this decision. Auchinleck sent a signal to General Dill asking him to recall Mackesy for consultations, and then asked the Admiral's permission to stay and watch the landing operation as a spectator. At midnight General Béthouart, the Commander of the French contingent, came on board with several of his officers and the British liaison officer, Captain Watney.

During May 12 the *Effingham* moved through Tjelsundet Fiord into Ofot Fiord and bombarded the west and north fronts of Narvik from Rømbaks Fiord at a thousand yards range in cold, wet weather

under a low ceiling of cloud. In the afternoon and early evening two battalions of the French Foreign Legion embarked for the Bjerkvik operation. The cloud cover and poor visibility prevented any interference by enemy aircraft.

Late in the evening—there is practically no darkness in these latitudes at this time of the year—the whole force moved up to the head of the Herjangs Fiord, preceded by five destroyers which opened fire on all the houses around the selected landing places at the head of the bay. The bombardment appeared to be very effective; within a few minutes the houses were ablaze. Then the cruisers, *Effingham* and *Aurora*, came up into position and joined in the bombardment with their pom-poms and six-inch guns. From the old battleship *Resolution*, five small French tanks (they were all that the Force possessed) were transferred to motor landing craft and headed for the shore; and from the cruisers, from the repair-ship bearing the historic name *Vindictive*, and from the net-layer *Protector*, the infantry set out in assault landing craft towing ships' boats. They were met by heavy machine-gun fire on their right flank, and sheered off from the landing place originally chosen. However, they got ashore farther west and quickly secured, without opposition, some high ground overlooking the beaches to the east. They quickly took some prisoners and discovered that the bombardment had killed more than a hundred Germans, totally destroyed a machine-gun emplacement and set an ammunition dump on fire.

A couple of tanks were now ashore, working in close co-operation with the infantry, and giving covering fire to fresh landings on the eastern beaches. More infantry and two more tanks were landed. The tanks silenced the enemy machine-guns. An officer of the Foreign Legion described them as 'frisking about like young puppies, firing all the time, in the midst of fields which were here free from snow'.<sup>1</sup> The whole force then moved rapidly inland, northwards and eastwards towards Lake Hartvig. The Germans were in full flight, leaving some sixty prisoners in French hands. The initiative, pressed home, bred success. General Béthouart, seeking to secure his left flank, sent a company of the Foreign Legion, supported offshore by an accompanying destroyer, westwards along the bank of the fiord towards Bogen. Before they had gone far they encountered a Polish battalion coming from Bogen by a road which, because of snow, had hitherto been counted out as impassable.

Bjerkvik and the whole of the north-west shore of Herjangs Fiord

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway* by T. K. Derry, p. 199, from *With the Foreign Legion at Narvik* by Capt. B. O. Lapie, p. 34.

were now in Allied hands. General Béthouart now turned his attention to the south-east shore, where there was a road leading down to Öyjord, lying at the northern tip of the entrance to Rømbaks Fiord and looking straight across a narrow neck of water towards Narvik. The French commander and some of his staff transferred to the British destroyer *Havelock*, which steamed down Herjangs Fiord, ready to protect with her guns a detachment of thirty motor-cyclists who approached the village by the road. They encountered no opposition. Béthouart went ashore with a small landing party and welcomed the motor-cyclists. Öyjord—and with it the control of the entrance to Rømbaks Fiord—was in Allied hands, and the only line of retreat remaining to the Germans besieged in Narvik was by the difficult road through the mountains to Hundalen.

By these swift and successful operations, executed at a cost of fewer than forty casualties, the ground had been skilfully prepared for the eventual capture of Narvik. The whole episode was in sharp contrast with much else that had happened in Norway, and at an early and difficult stage in the war it offered an excellent example of the right way in which to conduct combined operations.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck remarked in his despatch: 'Although I was present in the capacity of a spectator only, I am constrained to express my admiration for the way in which the whole operation was conceived and effected by all concerned. I was particularly struck by the businesslike efficiency of the French Foreign Legion which carried out the landing. That the landing was not interfered with by enemy aircraft was almost certainly due to the fortunate weather conditions prevailing at the time. At this period there were no land-based aircraft available in Norway with which to counter enemy air attacks, and a bombing raid might well have turned the operation from a success into a failure.'

At seven o'clock on the morning of May 13, on board H.M.S. *Effingham*, Auchinleck wrote his first personal letter to Dill, in the hope that it would accompany the joint report called for in his instructions. He gave a concise and vivid account of the operation which he had just witnessed and added, 'I like General Béthouart, who knows what he wants, and the French officers seem most capable. The Navy did their part very well indeed. The only pity is that no *British* units participated.'

<sup>1</sup> T. K. Derry calls it 'the first of the opposed landings on which Allied fortunes in the later war years were so largely to depend and our first experiment in war with the landing craft which proved to be one of the main instruments of victory'. *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway*, p. 199.

He continued with an extremely shrewd and candid assessment of the situation as he saw it after forty-eight hours on the scene:

I have a feeling that the Navy dislike these operations as at present prosecuted. They are being subjected daily to a lot of bombing and have had losses and casualties on an appreciable scale. They do not like being bombed in these narrow waters, which is natural as they have no really effective reply. They would not mind if they could see some result in the shape of a definite and quick decision, but they do not like the rather objectless work which they perforce have to do day after day. They are also anxious as to the feasibility of discharging efficiently and quickly the shipping which will be needed to maintain the forces as a whole. Here again, it is the bombing which worries them. I do not mean that they are faint-hearted—far from it—but there is no doubt that the advent of land-based fighter aircraft would make them much happier. Incidentally, I have yet to meet a sailor who thinks that a defended anchorage at Narvik is a necessity to the Navy, so it is not a question of the Army protecting the anchorage for the use of the Navy on the high seas, but of the Navy using the anchorage for the protection of the Army in the coastal waters of Norway. I rather thought that this would prove to be the true situation, and I am laying my plans accordingly.

I am a little anxious about the situation at Mo and as to the chance of stabilization at Bodo. There is no doubt whatever that the enemy bombers, if unmolested, can offset the value of sea power in these narrow waters, and that they can make the maintenance of small forces almost impossible unless we can provide an adequate counter in the air and on the ground. I know that you know this well enough, and I hope that the War Cabinet realize it too. I hope to have fighter aircraft in the air on or about May 20. I did not expect much from the 'independent' companies. To be a successful guerilla you must, I think, be a guerilla in your own country, not in someone else's. I now propose to coalesce them into a unit of light infantry under Gubbins and to put them under the commander, 24th Infantry Brigade. I notice that in one or two recent War Office messages they speak of the 'desirability' of holding Bodo. In my humble opinion it is not a question of 'desirability', but of sheer necessity. I hope you will agree, for if Bodo goes I cannot long be responsible for Narvik.

I know how hard pressed you must be to find men for all

requirements, but I would like to remind you that with the departure of the 24th Brigade to Bodo my *British* troops in Narvik will be reduced to one battalion, exclusive of artillery, sappers, etc. I do feel it most desirable that I should be given another British brigade if it can possibly be made available.

In every campaign there is a certain minimum of force which must, in my opinion, be provided in fairness to the responsible commander and to the troops under him. This applies at present particularly to air forces and anti-aircraft artillery, but also in the long run to all the other forces specified. I have done my best to reduce my estimate to the greatest extent compatible with security, but it would be criminal to pretend that one can make bricks without straw. If H.M.G. think that the commitment involved in the preservation of northern Norway is worth adding to their other commitments, I trust that they will set aside *definitely* the forces required for the purpose. I feel very strongly that if they are not prepared to do this it would be better to come away now than to risk throwing good money after bad by failing to provide the necessary forces. I would like to point out also that even if the forces required can be provided the difficulty of finding an adequate number of suitable landing grounds in this very broken terrain might still prove to be the deciding factor, though I hope that things may possibly be better in this respect than they appear at present. I cannot say yet. If there is any chance of it being decided to evacuate Norway the sooner the decision is taken the better, as every day's delay must increase the difficulty of the operation of withdrawal. In any event, land-based aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery will be needed to cover the evacuation, so the development of landing grounds and the installation of artillery must continue.

I do not wish to appear pessimistic, and I am not pessimistic, but I feel that I must say what I think without fear or favour. That is what I have tried to do in this letter, and what I shall continue to do.

One thing more I would like to add, and that is if we do hold northern Norway, and I hope we will, our defence should be active and not passive. As soon as we are in a position to do so we should give the German a taste of his own medicine. This can be done, I think, without seriously increasing our commitments in the country, and I am already looking ahead with this in view.

That afternoon the *Effingham* reached Harstad. Colonel Dowler came aboard, accompanied by Brigadier Fraser, the commander of

the 24th (Guards) Brigade. These two officers had come to discuss with Lord Cork, the Commander-in-Chief, plans for the reinforcement of Mo, where the situation, because of the rapid and continued German advance northwards, had become unpleasant and looked like becoming critical. Auchinleck's disquiet was deepened by the continued absence of General Mackesy from what was obviously bound to be a conference of considerable importance. It was explained that he was again unwell.

Although he had as yet received no reply to his signal to Dill urging Mackesy's recall for consultation, Auchinleck decided that the time had now come to act on this matter. He had two brief private consultations with Captain Maund, the Admiral's Chief of Staff, and with Colonel Dowler. He then spoke to the Admiral, and with his concurrence announced that he had assumed command of Allied land and air forces in place of General Mackesy.

Immediately—and again with Lord Cork's agreement—he issued verbal orders to Brigadier Fraser to go to Bodo, instead of to Mo, taking the Irish Guards with him. These were subsequently confirmed in writing. He explained his reasons for this action in a private letter to Dill the following day. Mo was at the end of a long, narrow fiord, in which ships had already been subject to such severe air attack that the Admiral was averse from having to maintain it by sea. The road from Mo to Bodo was still unusable on account of snow. His instructions to Fraser were, therefore, to deny the area Bodo-Saltdalen permanently to the enemy, to work southwards and to get in touch with Mo if he could, but in any event to hold on to Bodo.

The letter continued:

The transport which put the Scots Guards ashore at Mo was very heavily bombed all day, and only escaped being sunk by a miracle it seems. The Germans . . . put about a battalion ashore at Hemnes, twenty miles south-west of Mo. The Navy missed this lot by forty minutes but sank their ship after they had landed and with it, we hope, their equipment and stores.

I am reinforcing Bodo at once with the third battalion of the 24th Bde—the South Wales Borderers—and am also going to send a whole twenty-five pounder battery and some Bofors. I hope these will be in time to pull the chestnut out of the fire. Anyway we must keep Bodo. If I have to let go at Mo, I will have a shot at getting it back as soon as I can, but you will see that this southern front is becoming a relatively serious commitment. I have put Gubbins and his companies under Fraser.

As soon as Fraser had been given his orders Auchinleck and Gammell went ashore. Auchinleck saw Mackesy and told him that he had decided to use the discretionary powers vested in him by the C.I.G.S. and supersede him forthwith. Auchinleck gave Dill his reasons at some length; in his despatch he made it clear that the personal relations between Mackesy and Lord Cork could not ensure whole-hearted co-operation between the two Services, but he also stressed two important considerations: General Mackesy had been to him uniformly helpful and informative; and many of his own subsequent actions were based on Mackesy's advice and information. Having to remove a general from his command in the field is not an agreeable experience. It was to befall Auchinleck more than once.

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Now that Auchinleck was in command and no longer a spectator, he could address himself, with energy and resolution, to the task of tidying up. There was a great deal of administrative straightening to be done. Since he and Lord Cork were in cordial and cheerful relations with each other, co-operation between the Services was no longer a difficulty. However, until the Admiral could be persuaded (as he was—Captain Maund acting as a tactful intermediary—some four days later) to establish his headquarters on land, he tended to be somewhat inaccessible. There remained two matters of immediate concern: relations with the Norwegians, both civil and military, and relations with the Allied forces, French and Polish (but especially French), under his command.

On the morning of May 14, therefore, Auchinleck had a conference with General Béthouart. He wrote to Dill later that day: 'I have now put Béthouart, whom I like very much indeed, in charge of the whole centre sector, Narvik—Bardufoss,<sup>1</sup> and this should work

<sup>1</sup> The airfield at Bardufoss was being constructed at high speed, with miracles of ingenuity and enterprise. About a thousand volunteer civilian workers were recruited from all over northern Norway by a wireless appeal put out by the local trade union leader. They arrived by fishing-smack, and brought with them some German lorries which had been taken out of the hold of a German store-ship which the Norwegians had captured and taken into Norway. Wing-Commander R. L. R. (later Air-Marshal Sir Richard) Atcherley, who was in charge of the job, had the luck to find a highly capable assistant, a Capt. Woods of the Sappers, who in civilian life was an official of the L.C.C. building department. The chance to put order into a job was all that he wanted, and he went to it with a will, to such a degree that Auchinleck could tell Dill on May 14, 'We hope to use Bardufoss on the 20th.'

very well. I have had a long talk with him today and been very full and frank with him. He is a most refreshing person to work with.'

Relations with the Norwegians were not so comfortable. Though their spirit was unbroken by the tribulations which had befallen them, the Norwegians were battered and bewildered. A people of deeply civilian and pacific traditions, they had been caught up in the swirl of modern war; their honesty had been bruised by the double-dealing and treachery which they had encountered; they were disillusioned and tired, and their nerves were on edge. It was not easy for them to understand the reasons for the Allies' failure to give them successful aid. They strove still to rely, as far as they could, on their own independent effort. They were touchy and suspicious about co-operation, and they strongly resented measures which the Allied authorities thought necessary in their own defence. They had little awareness of the needs of military security; and it had to be admitted that there were still, in their midst, many who sympathized with the Germans rather than with the Allies.

Auchinleck strove as quickly as he could to straighten this tangle. The final paragraph of his first operation instruction to Brigadier Fraser read: 'It is essential that your operations should be in no way hampered or prejudiced by the presence of civilians in the area of operation. You have, therefore, full authority to take such action as you may consider necessary in this connexion. In particular, you should have no hesitation in taking over civilian telephones in the area, requisitioning such buildings as you may require, and evacuating the civil population from the areas in which their presence may be undesirable. Should you require assistance in this evacuation, you will inform Force H.Q. forthwith.'

To Dill, Auchinleck wrote: 'I shall shortly have to have a wholesale clearing out of the inhabitants from the occupied areas. The place is riddled, I am convinced, with spies.'

In the end measures as drastic as these were never taken. Auchinleck put himself as soon as possible on terms of courtesy and understanding with the Norwegian military authorities; the fact that the King and the Government established themselves at Tromsø, north of Narvik, and (as will be seen) British diplomatic and military missions were sent to them there, led to the clearing up of major misunderstandings.

Thinking it over long afterwards, Auchinleck wrote: 'The Norwegians were most helpful, but they could not understand the nature of war—comprehensibly, as they had no experience or conception of it. This did not make things easier. We, hardened by centuries of war, found them most engaging and hospitable but not



easy to convince as to the realities of war. Anyway, they had not invited us to come!'

One of his first steps on assuming command was to address polite telegrams, repeated by letter, to General Rugge, the Norwegian C-in-C., and to General Fleischer, the Commander of the 6th Norwegian Division in front of Narvik. He was interrupted in this task by the noisy roar and clatter of anti-aircraft fire. His war diary recorded tersely: 'Considerable enemy air activity over Harstad. Some bombs dropped. No damage. Our anti-aircraft artillery very much in action, and wasted a lot of valuable ammunition.'

At three o'clock that afternoon the *Chrobry*, still carrying a considerable quantity of Force H.Q.'s stores which there had been no time to unload, sailed from the Skånland anchorage to Bodo, with the Irish Guards aboard and the H.Q. staff of 24th (Guards) Brigade. Brigadier Fraser, however, was not with his H.Q., but went on to Mo in the destroyer *Somali*; the Brigadier, it should be noted, was suffering from the effects of a wound which he had received in fighting on the Ankenes peninsula at the end of April.

A succession of misfortunes then set in. Shortly after midnight on the night of May 14-15 the *Chrobry* was attacked from the air as she left the southernmost point of the Lofoten Islands to head across the Vest Fiord. There was more than a suspicion that there had been a leakage of information before the ship sailed. The most effective bomb hit the cabins in which the officers were sleeping. The C.O., three majors and two junior officers were killed. Fire broke out immediately amidships, and the majority of the men were isolated in the forepart, where they could not lower the boats. The fire spread to the stacked ammunition. It looked as if a major explosion might occur at any moment. The Irish Guards formed up on deck, with arms and kit, as though on parade at Wellington Barracks. The injured were dragged from the blazing wreckage by search parties. The rest of the battalion stood motionless in their ranks in the cold, grey light. The chaplain began to recite the Rosary.

The sloop *Stork* stood by to try to ward off any renewed bombing attack. The destroyer *Wolverine* closed to the rescue. In sixteen minutes 694 men were trans-shipped from the doomed *Chrobry* to the *Wolverine*. It was small wonder that the captain of the *Wolverine* compared the guardsmen's discipline to that of the men in the *Birkenhead*.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck wrote to Dill on May 15: 'The ship is lost, and all in her, including three light tanks. We had the battalion back here'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Their C.O. for the rest of the campaign was a captain.

<sup>2</sup> Harstad.

by nine this morning thanks to the Navy who did splendidly—they are grand. The battalion is now in rest billets and will be refitted. They have no rifles, machine-guns or anything. I saw them come ashore and was much impressed by their bearing—a fine crowd. I have been all day arranging to get the South Wales Borderers off in their place and the Admiral is taking them down in his flagship. We must get them there somehow. Fraser who had gone ahead to Mo and Bodo in a destroyer—*Somali*—is also away, as *Somali* was badly damaged by a separate attack on the same night, and is now on her way to Scapa. I have put Gubbins in command at Bodo-Mo and am sending him the 24th Bde staff. I cannot say I am happy about the situation down there but, if we can hang on until we get our own aeroplanes functioning, we ought to be all right. It is our turn to have a bit of luck! I am just off to say a few words to the Irish Guards.<sup>1</sup>

He added a postscript: 'These Fleet Air Arm fighters do their very best but they have not got the performance to keep off the Hun and he does not seem to think much of our A.A. fire!!! However, our tails are up!'<sup>1</sup>

His war diary commented: 'Our A.A. fire more controlled, but still wild.'

Lord Cork sent him a brief note late that afternoon about the move of the South Wales Borderers to Mo. 'We have to hold our own for six days,' the Admiral wrote, 'and we shall have our own air squadrons installed. If we give up now we shall hand a success to the enemy. If we hold on there seems no valid reason why this setback should not be the prelude to a success.'

Early on the following day Auchinleck sent a signal to Colonel Gubbins telling him that Mo was not to be abandoned. He amplified the signal in a letter, which Brigadier Gammell, who was going down to the Bodo-Mo area with the S.W.B. in the *Effingham*, was to deliver:

You will have had my telegram telling you that I wish the detachment at Mo to hold on to its position, and not withdraw.

I think it most important that we should give up no more ground. I know the detachment is somewhat isolated at present, and I know the Germans may be in superior force to the south of you, but I am pretty sure that they are groping in the dark very much as we are, and I hope that when they come up against really determined opposition they will sit back and think about it.

<sup>1</sup> The exclamation mark, often used in triplicate, as here, has been retained in the quotations from Auchinleck's writings, because it is characteristic of his prose style.

Reinforcements for you should arrive with this letter, and I hope that their arrival will enable you, in your turn, to reinforce Trappes-Lomax at Mo.

He is very anxious to get back Fotheringham's company to his own battalion. However, I leave all this to you.

Gammell is going down with this letter, and I want you to tell him exactly what you think about the situation, and what your requirements are to enable you to hold on in the Bodo-Mo area. I will do my utmost to send you whatever you may want.

It will not be long now, I hope, before we have our own aircraft in the air, and that ought to make a lot of difference.

Things are going well here, and the French are pushing on towards Narvik.

Thank you very much for all you have done so far. I wish you good luck. I have the greatest confidence in you. I hope to get down before long to see you.

Friday, May 17, was a more than ordinarily long and busy day. It was fine and warm and the last of the snow disappeared rapidly. Since it was Norway's Independence Day, flags were flown wherever possible, and telegrams of good wishes were sent off to the King and the Norwegian Government. Lord Cork, having set up his H.Q. ashore at Harstad, paid an official call on Auchinleck. Inter-Service liaison began to take on a real meaning, with the two commanders' principal staff officers sharing a room in Force H.Q. Auchinleck in his conversation with the Admiral stressed the need for an efficient watch on the coast to prevent German landings behind the Allies' advanced troops; one such landing had already been reported north of Bodo that day. Both commanders agreed that, since they still were virtually without aircraft, if the Germans were allowed to get away with tactics of this kind they could make the position of the Allies' forward troops impossible.

Auchinleck was also visited that morning by General Rugge and General Fleischer. They were accompanied by Colonel Finne, the Norwegian liaison officer attached to Force H.Q. The Norwegian C.-in-C. insisted that Mo be retained and Mosjøen recaptured, in order to deny the Germans any more advanced landing grounds. Their own forces in action now consisted only of General Fleischer's 6th Division, but General Rugge claimed that he was raising new battalions.

After the Norwegians had had lunch with him in the mess, Auchinleck went back to his own office and drew up the report which London had demanded. He began with the assumption that his

first object, the denial to the Germans of a supply of iron ore shipped through Narvik, had been achieved, because Narvik no longer existed as a port. He ruled out, because of Britain's relations with Sweden, any idea of interfering with the iron ore route through Lulea. Therefore his task, as he now saw it, was to defend northern Norway, keeping a foothold in the country both for the Norwegian Government and for the Allies. Bodo, he pointed out, must be held permanently in order to defend Narvik; therefore he had put in train the troop movements which have already been described. It was not possible, he said, to construct a military base at Skånland. This, with a hospital, capable of taking 1,200 patients, should be set up at Tromsø, where the Norwegian King and Government were already established; their agreement to this project was contingent upon the provision of adequate anti-aircraft defence.

For the area as a whole Auchinleck set out his requirements, in view of what he had experienced and seen in six days, as four cruisers and six destroyers for naval defence, seventeen infantry battalions, two hundred A.A. guns (thirteen heavy and eight light batteries), seven batteries of field artillery and howitzers, some armoured troops, and an air force of four squadrons.<sup>1</sup>

To supplement the report, Auchinleck settled down to write a private, explanatory letter to Dill. Before he had finished this letter he went in, at about a quarter past six, to see Lord Cork. While they were together a signal from the Chiefs of Staff was delivered, addressed to them both. They read it in some dismay. It made mincemeat of Auchinleck's report:

Situation has been changed by events on Western Front. Your Force must be limited to 1st French Light Division, 24th (Guards) Brigade, ten Independent Companies, with proportionate artillery, engineers and services, forty-eight heavy, sixty light and anti-aircraft guns, one Hurricane, one Gladiator Squadron and possibly one Army Co-operation Flight. It is accepted that only first and third objects can be achieved at present, but possession of a base in Narvik may make second possible in time. Northern Norway is not to be abandoned unless militarily inevitable under above limitations. Re-organization and galvanization of Norwegians to take part in defence must be pushed firmly. Request your view as to retention of Narvik under these circumstances. 1129/17.

<sup>1</sup> T. K. Derry (*History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway*. Vol. I, p. 202) says that these details 'read ironically in view of the desperate position already taking shape in northern France'. Auchinleck at Harstad had no opportunity to appreciate this irony.

Auchinleck was not able to finish his letter to Dill until the following day. When he was able to get back to it he remarked with some justification:

The Admiralty telegram 1129/17 came yesterday when I was with Lord Cork and is a blow as you can imagine. I am afraid that I cannot see the argument that, because resources cannot be made available, it should be expected that the same task can be accomplished. Is it not fair to expect that the means should be commensurate with the object? However, you will have had Lord Cork's official answer before you get this and can form your own opinion.

All I can say to you is that I will do my very best to do what is wanted, but I will not pretend to be able to do anything for which I think the means are inadequate.

This was his immediate reaction, but under the pressure of events it was several days before he was able to send a considered reply. Meanwhile, the persistent misfortune which dogged the despatch of reinforcements to Bodo and Mo had by no means played itself out. Leaving the Admiral in his land headquarters, the *Effingham* set out for Bodo on the evening of May 17, with the much-enduring H.Q. staff of 24th (Guards) Brigade and the South Wales Borderers aboard, and Brigadier Gammell taking Auchinleck's urgent message to Gubbins. The cruiser and her accompanying destroyer took an unusual course outside the Leads, in order to diminish the risk of attack from the air. When they were within an hour's steaming of Bodo the *Effingham*, moving at twenty knots, struck an uncharted rock. The escorting vessels closed to the rescue; all the troops were saved, but once again much valuable equipment—with the exception of three treasured Bren carriers—was lost. The *Effingham* resisted efforts to salvage her and became a total loss, and the rescued troops were brought back to Harstad.

Auchinleck gave Dill a brief account of this latest tribulation, and added:

... A cruel stroke as she had not been interfered with in any way by the enemy bombers which is, of course, our chief fear in all these operations. The battalion is back here being refitted and I am having another try. Bodo *must* be reinforced, particularly as the Mo detachment is being outflanked, and must retreat, so Gubbins says. Why our soldiers cannot be as mobile as the Germans I don't know, but they aren't apparently. Anyway, I have had to accept Gubbins's recommendation, but have told

him to resist all the way and fight hard. James Gammell went in *Effingham* to get first hand information from Gubbins, but, of course, never got there and is now back here.

The result was that, even with another try, any reinforcements that might be able to reach the southern front would be belated and under-equipped. Nor was it to be expected that the Germans would wait conveniently; in fact they attacked in the Mo area on the afternoon of May 17. Since they had assembled, for what Hitler intended to be the final drive to clear the whole of northern Norway, no fewer than five mountain infantry battalions and at least three troops of mountain artillery, under a general with considerable experience of warfare in this kind of country, and since the only road linking Mo to Bodo passed through a narrow defile and then up on to snow-covered open slopes, and was exposed all the way to air attack, their pressure was severe. The main attacking force was the 'little lot' which the Navy had not been able to get when they landed at Hemnesberget. From Finneid on the mainland, some six miles south-west of Mo, they moved steadily up the coastal road and spread out into the hills to the east. The fighting went on throughout the evening and into the short and twilit night. Gubbins, whom Auchinleck had now appointed acting brigadier in command of the 24th (Guards) Brigade, in place of Fraser who was being invalided home, flew down during the night to investigate the situation for himself. In a guarded telephone conversation from Mo, Gubbins made it clear to Auchinleck that the Scots Guards had been out-flanked, and that he himself had ordered a withdrawal. Auchinleck accepted this decision, and told him to continue the retirement northwards, contesting the enemy's advance by all means in his power.

The Scots Guards, with some Norwegian troops moving ahead of them, left Mo during the morning and early afternoon of May 18, and on their way out blew up two bridges over the River Rana to the north of the town. By half past three that day Mo was in German hands. The blown bridges presented a serious obstacle, and for some hours they did not press their advance particularly hard. The Scots Guards therefore continued their withdrawal across mountainous and thinly-populated country, without interference from the enemy, throughout May 18-19. On May 19 they halted and rested some thirty-two miles north of Mo; and Auchinleck sent their C.O. a signal saying, 'You have now reached good position for defence. Essential to stand and fight. . . . I rely on Scots Guards to stop the enemy.'

\* \* \*

While these developments were occurring in the south, Auchinleck himself was very active at Harstad. The Polish ship *Batory* arrived late on the evening of May 17, with the Norwegian Foreign Minister on board and Sir Cecil Dormer, the British Minister to Norway. On the morning of May 18 Lord Cork, Auchinleck and Sir Cecil had a discussion, the purpose of which was to straighten out the tangle which had beset Anglo-Norwegian relations, both in the political and in the military spheres. Later in the same day Auchinleck had a talk on similar lines with Colonel R. C. G. Pollock, who was the head of the British Military Mission to the Norwegian Government, charged with the task of reducing friction and misunderstanding. The trouble was not any fundamental lack of goodwill on either side, but that, in their small and distant theatre of operations, both British and Norwegians were confronted with the effects of total war, as waged by the Germans at the zenith of their power, for which they were psychologically as well as materially unprepared. Their reactions in this predicament were not dissimilar from those of the British and French Governments and military leaders in the midst of the great battles raging at exactly the same time; and because of what was happening on the Western Front, their own plans and hopes melted like snow under strong sun.

In the course of the morning of May 19 the news of the evacuation of Mo reached Harstad. Gubbins flew down again from Bodo on another reconnaissance, and before he went put in an urgent plea to Force H.Q. for fighter support—the only chance of which was in Fleet Air Arm aircraft operating off the *Ark Royal*. Auchinleck's war diary recorded laconically: 'Navy asked to do their best.' Meanwhile, after a conference with Lord Cork and the A.O.C., Group-Captain Moore, Auchinleck began to prepare the answer to the Chiefs of Staff's minatory telegram of May 17. At eight o'clock in the evening—'Third time lucky?' was Auchinleck's canny comment—two companies of the South Wales Borderers and (yet again) the Headquarters of 24th (Guards) Brigade set off in two destroyers for Bodo, hoping to reach their destination about four o'clock on the following morning.

Meanwhile, on the road north of Mo, Colonel Trappes-Lomax of the Scots Guards was proposing further withdrawal; the situation report which he sent to Force H.Q. gave rise to considerable disquiet in Auchinleck's mind, and he sent off the signal referred to above.<sup>1</sup> But at half past ten that night Gubbins came through on the telephone to Dowler and said that he had spent the day with Trappes-Lomax and was quite happy about the situation. Dowler told him

<sup>1</sup> P. 123.

about Trappes-Lomax's situation report and Auchinleck's reply. He laid emphasis on Auchinleck's insistence on a fighting withdrawal; Gubbins answered that he fully understood the Commander-in-Chief's intention, and during the day had pointed out to Trappes-Lomax that he did not altogether agree with his plan. At midnight the Commander-in-Chief himself spoke to Gubbins. He confirmed the points which Dowler had made. The war diary recorded: 'He understands what I want, I think, and is going to Mo to see Trappes-Lomax again. Again told him to remove any officer not fit to command and replace him at his discretion.'

It was with some relief that Force H.Q. heard on the morning of May 20 that the two destroyers ferrying the S.W.B. and Brigade H.Q. had at last reached Bodo safely. However, the main pre-occupation throughout the day was the Norwegians' manifest—and in the circumstances quite comprehensible—reluctance to permit the use of Tromsø as a base without adequate anti-aircraft protection. Auchinleck sent one of the stiffest telegrams which he had yet drafted to the Chiefs of Staff:

Norwegians show signs of refusing use of Tromsø to us as base unless A.A. defences are provided. Impossible for me to provide these at moment or in near future in view of commitments already undertaken by me. Base at Tromsø essential to maintenance of force and urgent therefore that special provision of A.A. guns should be made without delay. Minimum number likely to be in any way effective is sixteen heavy and twelve light. Am now being pressed by Norwegians to detach troops to guard aerodromes and landing grounds north-east of Tromsø as no reliable Norwegian troops are available for this work. Have little doubt this further dispersion of force will shortly be unavoidable as I cannot risk possibility of being attacked by air from north as well as south. These detachments would entail further protective measures by Navy as maintenance of detachments must be by sea. These considerations bear on your telegram 1129/17 which will be answered tomorrow.

The strategic situation was beginning to cause both Lord Cork and Auchinleck no less concern than their tactical difficulties. At their usual conference that evening (which was interrupted by a heavy air raid on oil storage tanks at Harstad and on a hospital near by) Auchinleck agreed to draft on the Admiral's behalf a signal putting the strategic facts as clearly and concisely as possible. It went off that night in these terms:



*For Chiefs of Staff from Lord Cork*

*Your 1129/17*

In approaching this question it must be ever present in the mind that although a change of situation on the Western Front may affect the availability of forces for this area, it cannot in the same way affect the strength of the forces required to attain the specified objects.

The following points must be considered:

(a) Narvik is not yet actually in our hands. No precise date can be given for its occupation. In any case Narvik by itself can have no value as a base for some time for reasons already given.

(b) Narvik cannot be considered apart from the whole area which has to be defended.

(c) Narvik-Harstad-Bodo are interdependent and upon the security of this area depends that of Tromsø.

The ability to maintain the positions now, or to be occupied, depends entirely upon:

(1) The supply and maintenance of a sufficient air force. This entails the possession of secure landing grounds and bases of supply necessitating:

(2) The provision of ample A.A. artillery.

No galvanization of Norwegians, few in number and not proving of great value, can compensate for deficiencies in these two prime essentials.

Further the use of small vessels by the enemy upon such an indented coast can only be countered by fast light craft of suitable or superior type, wherewith to deny the enemy the mobility of sea transport which we, and not he, should alone possess.

An appreciation of the situation created by your telegram under reference will shortly be forwarded by General Auchinleck and myself based upon these facts, which it is hoped in the meantime may receive the most earnest consideration of the Chiefs of Staff.

2217/18.

During May 21, while the Chiefs of Staff were digesting this rather bleak communication, Lord Cork, Auchinleck and Group-Captain Moore had a final conference about the reply to the telegram 1129/17. It went off over Auchinleck's signature as an agreed sequel to the previous night's 2217/18:

Following remarks represent my considered opinion after consultation with Lord Cork and Group-Captain Moore. They are based on assumption that situation in Norway remains generally as it is now. Any radical change, such as surrender by Norwegian

Government, Russian aggression through Finland or a German offensive from Lulea or by air and sea from Murmansk, is not catered for. They should be read in conjunction with Lord Cork's telegram 2217/18, which explains strategical situation in this theatre.

First, land forces, namely, twelve French and three British battalions plus ten Independent Companies, of which one is understood to be administrative, should suffice, provided that three field batteries, twenty-five pounder or four point five howitzer, two six-inch howitzer batteries, some kind of mobile units for patrolling, one machine-gun battalion, also four field and one field park companies, which are essential to operations in this difficult country, can be sent without further delay.

Forty-eight heavy and sixty light anti-aircraft guns can, of course, be distributed to give some apparent protection in vital areas, but this is unlikely to be effective should enemy put in heavy air attacks on bases and aerodromes, as appears possible.

It is reiterated that destruction of aerodrome at Bardufoss or of port facilities and accommodation at Harstad might, in existing circumstances, make the position of the Force untenable in a short time.

I cannot agree that there is reasonable prospect of my being able to achieve my task if less than half my considered demand for anti-aircraft artillery is to be provided, which itself is only two-thirds of the original estimate prepared by the General Staff at the War Office before my departure from London.

Secondly, air forces. The range of Gladiator aircraft is very limited, and even Hurricanes cannot give effective support in Bodo area, where it is urgently needed, from base at Skånland. To maintain effective patrol over base areas and fleet anchorages and patrols in Narvik-Harstad area two squadrons Hurricanes are the minimum required.

Failure to provide bombers will deprive me of only effective means of replying to enemy offensive and thereby strengthening morale of my forces, both naval and military, which is being steadily undermined by German superiority in the air and is causing me anxiety. Some bomber aircraft are essential to the achievement of the object and one squadron is the minimum. One flight Army co-operation aircraft is entirely inadequate in relation to the area to be covered.

The inevitability of the evacuation of northern Norway in the circumstances envisaged in your telegram is, in my opinion, entirely dependent on the enemy's will to avail himself of his

undoubted ability to attack. Should he attack I cannot, with the reduced forces suggested by you, hold myself responsible for the safety of this Force, nor will I pretend that there is any reasonable certainty of being able to achieve the object given to me in my Instructions. If, in spite of this, larger considerations lead His Majesty's Government to decide that northern Norway must continue to be held with the diminished resources laid down by them, I cannot answer for the consequences, but you may rest assured every effort will be made to do what is possible with the resources at my disposal.

The airfield at Bardufoss—one day later than Auchinleck had estimated in his letter to General Dill—came into operation during the morning of the 21st. Two entries in the war diary showed the effect of this long-awaited improvement: 'Sixteen Gladiators arrived safely off carrier this morning at Bardufoss aerodrome.<sup>1</sup> Two Gladiators missing, probably lost in fog which was prevalent at sea. Bardufoss just ready after strenuous work and A.A. guns are installed. A good job reflecting much credit on those concerned.' And 'Gladiator Squadron . . . had patrol over Harstad early this morning. This ought to help a lot. . . .'

Plans were now in hand for the capture of Narvik, but the southern front continued to give rise to anxiety. Such reinforcements as Auchinleck could spare he sent to Gubbins; two companies of the Irish Guards—refitted, as were the S.W.B., by heavy drawing on reserve stores and on equipment brought for the Norwegian Army—had been sent off on the previous evening to Bodo by 'puffer' (the small Norwegian coastal craft which were a stand-by of the Force throughout its whole stay in this region). This was the first time that an attempt had been made to send troops long distances by such a means. It came off, and they reached their destination safely late on the evening of the 21st, after an uneventful passage lasting twenty-one hours—to everyone's considerable relief. At half past two that afternoon two more companies of the Irish Guards were despatched in two destroyers, also to Bodo. With them went Colonel Dowler, in order to see Gubbins and assess the situation for himself.

The destroyers reached Bodo at a quarter to one on the following morning (May 22). The troops went ashore quickly, and Dowler

<sup>1</sup> They flew off H.M.S. *Furious* at 2 a.m. 'in miserable weather, with low cloud and very limited visibility'. Atcherley later described 'anxious hours in the early morning that I spent with only three machines out of eighteen on the landing ground, long after the complete squadron was due to arrive'. *Blackwood's*, No. 1504, February 1941, p. 124.

was asked not to spend more than three-quarters of an hour with Gubbins. With some temerity he doubled his allowance of time and had a long, heartening talk with Gubbins, whom he had not met before. He reported to Auchinleck: 'I feel that the operations about Bodo could not be in better hands.' His report, which the war diary described as 'excellent', was in Auchinleck's hands during the afternoon of the 22nd. It resulted in a number of important decisions. Auchinleck formed the troops in the area into 'Bodoforce' under Brigadier Gubbins and amalgamated his staff with that of the 24th (Guards) Brigade. He also removed Lieutenant-Colonel Trappes-Lomax from the command of the Scots Guards and ordered him to report forthwith to Harstad, as he was not satisfied with his conduct, or with that of his battalion, during and after the fighting round Mo. Gubbins, in process of an energetic reorganization of his forces in and to the south of Bodo, asked for reinforcements of infantry, motor transport, A.A. artillery and field artillery. The war diary recorded: 'Already in hand.' A company of French 25-mm. anti-tank guns, lent by General Béthouart, were sent off at once. So far as the infantry were concerned, Auchinleck proposed to send no more until three further Independent Companies arrived from England on May 30.

Auchinleck gave Lord Cork the gist of Dowler's report on the situation at Bodo:

Scots Guards expected to hold out in present positions, i.e. about Messingslette, twenty-five miles north-east of Mo, a few days longer. Enemy air attacks on communications north of Scots Guards is causing Gubbins some anxiety.

Gubbins has whole situation well in hand, and is doing very well. He has his plans to stop enemy well laid.

Gubbins wants very urgently three small vessels armed with some kind of gun to prevent enemy moving up coast at will in unarmed vessels, also to stop and examine Norwegian boats, and to help in attacking enemy flanks.

He considers enemy's relative freedom to move unopposed on the sea the most serious feature of the situation, and presses for any kind of naval help to stop this.

He is trying to move local vessels not needed at Bodo to Harstad.

Norwegians apt to be disheartened by our apparent weakness at sea. Even sporadic action would have marked effect.

I realize how short you are of ships and aircraft, and you know how difficult it is for troops to hold on if attacked in superior force

on land and liable also to be taken in rear from the sea. I am forced, however, to the conclusion that unless we can do something to offset the present German superiority on the sea and in the air the Bodo situation may again become critical.

I am doing my best to get the Bodo landing ground ready for our fighters which as you know cannot operate with any effect over that area from their present landing grounds. All the same, I cannot but take a serious view of the situation and will be grateful for any help which you can give me at sea or in the air.

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The situation in northern Norway on 23 May 1940 could on the whole, with the obvious exception of the increasing threat south of Bodo, be described as a good deal healthier and more stable than it had been a week earlier. The change was largely psychological: frustration, delay and mutual suspicion had been replaced by a sense of cheerful calm and united purpose. Auchinleck had proposed to issue on the following day—Empire Day—a Special Order of the Day; he showed it to Lord Cork, who approved of it so heartily that it was decided that it should go out above the signatures of all three Service commanders. It expressed the new mood with vigour and sincerity, unmarred by one rather engaging misprint:

We have now well-established bases in northern Norway, and the enemy is operating either at the end of a long line of difficult land communications or without any land or sea communications at all.

It is our firm intention to stop the further advance northwards of the enemy and to round up their forces in the Narvik area.

We then intend to turn the tables on them and to do to them what they have been trying to do to us.

Our brave allies, the French, have already carried out a brilliant landing operation from boats near Narvik and bundled the enemy out of his forward positions; they are pressing forward steadily in the most difficult country and have the upper hand.

We ask every one of you to give of his best and make up his mind that **THE ENEMY HAS GOT TO BE BEATEN** and beaten thoroughly.

We can only give of our best if every officer and man is determined, day in and day out, to use every bit of the brains, forethought, loyalty and determination which he possesses to make his own ship, unit establishment [*sic*] or depot the best disciplined and the most efficient in the Force.

You all know how our men are fighting on the sea and in the air and in France and Belgium against much heavier odds than we are faced with. It is up to us all here to FIGHT TO WIN so that we too may claim that we have done our part in saving our country from the Hun. Every German killed here is one the less to fight in France.

Man for man you are more than a match for the Germans so give them what they deserve.

The King of Norway and members of his Government were at Tromsø, living miles apart from one another in small farmhouses—the King's was a three-roomed cottage. But their spirits were unflagging; and Lord Cork flew up on the afternoon of the 23rd to put to them the plans which he and Auchinleck had worked out for the control of the civil population in the occupied areas. Just after mid-day there was a conference, attended by General Béthouart, Group-Captain Moore, Brigadier Gammell and Commander Hubback, and presided over by the G.O.C.-in-C., to discuss the final plans for the capture of Narvik. The conference decided that the operation should be carried out on the night of May 25–26 if atmospheric conditions both in the air and on the sea were favourable; Moore said that he would provide air patrols on the 25th and onwards 'to test the degree of immunity which might be expected from the air conditions and report the result to French H.Q.'. Similar reports would be given to French H.Q. by the Royal Navy operating in the fiord near Narvik. By noon on the 25th—or if postponed that day, by noon on the 26th—General Béthouart, acting on this information, would recommend proceeding with the operation. Finally it was agreed that if it were not carried out on either of the nights 25th–26th or 26th–27th, the operation would be executed on the night 27th–28th, if fighter support from the Hurricane Squadron were available.

Auchinleck showed the report of these decisions to Lord Cork at a quarter to nine on the morning of May 24 and secured his approval. But in the meantime major decisions were being taken hundreds of miles to the southward which were to have the most serious effect on all these plans and their implementation.

On May 20 the new Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, suggested somewhat tentatively that it might be the right policy to evacuate Narvik after capturing it. 'A definite recommendation to this effect was first made by the Chiefs of Staff on May 22 after careful consideration of the pros and cons. They were impressed by the drain on the Navy, especially in destroyers, and the impossibility of

providing the land and air forces which General Auchinleck thought necessary.<sup>1</sup> They did not believe that a withdrawal from Norway could now influence the battle in France, but the forces it could release might be urgently needed in the United Kingdom and home waters.<sup>2</sup>

The Cabinet gave orders on May 23 for plans for withdrawal to be prepared. Churchill's account is brief and poignant: 'But now tremendous events became dominant. On May 24, in the crisis of shattering defeat, it was decided that we must concentrate all we had in France and at home. The capture of Narvik had however to be achieved both to ensure the destruction of the port and to cover our withdrawal.'<sup>3</sup>

Unaware for the moment of these grave decisions, Lord Cork approved the plans for the assault on Narvik, and agreed—though with some reluctance—that the requirements of 'Bodoforce' must have precedence over other operations at the moment. His day at Tromsø had been fruitful; he had come back with a promise of co-operation from the Norwegian Government; he had got agreement to the provision of a base and facilities, the command of which and the control of the troops would be nominally Norwegian.

The telegram from the Chiefs of Staff conveying the Cabinet's orders was sent off during the night and reached Lord Cork early on the following morning;

His Majesty's Government has decided your forces are to evacuate northern Norway at earliest moment. Reason for this is that the troops, ships, guns and certain equipment are urgently required for defence of United Kingdom.

We understand from military point of view operation of evacuation will be facilitated if enemy forces are largely destroyed or captured. Moreover destruction of railway and Narvik port facilities make its capture highly desirable.

Nevertheless speed of evacuation once begun should be of primary consideration in order to limit duration of maximum naval efforts.

Two officers will be sent at once from U.K. to concert evacuation plans with you and General Auchinleck.

Evacuation of all equipment vehicles and stores will clearly take too long. Following are required to be evacuated in order of

<sup>1</sup> They had in front of them Auchinleck's telegram of May 21.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy*, Vol. II, by J. R. M. Butler, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol I, p. 515.

importance from point of view of defence of U.K.: (a) Personnel (b) Light A.A. arms and ammunition (c) Twenty-five pounders (d) Heavy A.A. guns and ammunition. Tactical conditions must rule but so far as they permit plans should be framed accordingly.

Norwegian Government have not repeat not yet been informed and greatest secrecy should be observed.

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All that remained now was to fulfil these orders—a delicate and complicated task, made even more difficult and extremely disagreeable by the necessity of keeping the final intention of His Majesty's Government secret until the last possible moment. It fell into three main parts: the capture of Narvik, the evacuation of Bodo, and the final and complete withdrawal of all British forces from Norway. The planning, and to some extent the execution, of these three aspects of the job went on simultaneously, imposing, in addition to the physical hazards inseparable from war, a heavy mental and moral strain. It was an ordeal not dissimilar from that endured by the officers and men of the B.E.F. in northern France. Their drama, however, was played out in the forefront of the world's stage, a terrible and awe-inspiring spectacle of ruin and defeat which was to be transformed into a popular myth of heroism. The evacuation of northern Norway was carried out in the long, pitiless daylight of an Arctic summer, hardly attended with any publicity at all, and only remembered by those who took part in it—but by them remembered most vividly, with an ironic, wry and soldierly pride, like that of the men who marched with Sir John Moore down to the sea at Corunna.

A little after eight o'clock on the morning of May 25 Auchinleck had an urgent telephone call asking him to call on Lord Cork as soon as possible. Adversity of this order is a test not only of leadership, but of the spirit of companionship in men differing in outlook, training and temperament. These two passed the test with honours. They brought a third into their consultations, the French General Béthouart. For Béthouart, conscious as he was of the vast tragedy which was befalling his own country, the 'dilemma' (as the Official History puts it) 'was even more painful than it was for the British commanders'. He spent a brief half-hour alone pondering it. Béthouart was brave, generous and chivalrous. He agreed to go on with the attack on Narvik as planned—and as ordered by Auchinleck—on the night of May 27-28, although this would inevitably mean that French troops would continue to be kept far from their



homeland in the hour of her greatest need. But the idea of having to deceive the Norwegians distressed and angered this good man, as it did the others. Even this unpleasant exigency he, with them, accepted.

The final phases of the Norwegian campaign were carried out with skill and neatness. The earlier confusions had been sorted out; things ran, on the whole, with surprising smoothness, which made the knowledge of imminent departure even more ironic.

Of equal priority were the assault on Narvik and the withdrawal of 'Bodoforce'. The last company of South Wales Borderers was due to go down to Bodo in H.M.S. *Beagle* to join their battalion. Dowler was sent down with them to see Gubbins; and there, as at Harstad, the atmosphere was one of cheerful resilience and efficiency in the face of manifest difficulties.

Dowler was in Bodo in the small hours of May 26; he told Gubbins to prepare for a fairly rapid evacuation. Since his last visit to the southern front there had been a number of important developments. The Germans, it was ascertained, had assembled about four thousand men in the Mosjøen-Mo area. The Scots Guards, wearied, depleted in numbers but not decimated (their casualties, said Dowler in his report to the General, were 'about eighty and not two hundred as reported by W/T'), had retreated up the long, difficult road through the mountains north of Mo. Gubbins decided that a stand should be made at a hamlet called Pothus, some ten miles from the mouth of the River Saltdal. Two bridges, and woods in the hills on either side of the river, which was over a hundred yards wide at this point, made a defensive position of some strength—the penultimate before Rognan, at the mouth of the river. Here the Irish Guards and Nos. 2 and 3 Independent Companies stood and fought. There was a tough, protracted infantry, machine-gun and mortar battle, lasting from the small hours of May 25 through to the evening of the following day. In command throughout was the former O.C. of No. 2 Independent Company, Major, Acting Lieutenant-Colonel (later General Sir Hugh) Stockwell,<sup>1</sup> who was awarded the D.S.O. for his conduct in this and subsequent operations. When Dowler saw Gubbins early on the morning of the 26th the latter was 'hopeful but not confident' of holding the Pothus position. By 11.30 a.m. however, the enemy were pressing so hard that Gubbins, who had come up to his forward headquarters at Rognan, ordered a withdrawal. It was not until the middle of the afternoon that Stockwell could concert this; a stubborn rearguard

<sup>1</sup> Sir Hugh was the General Officer Commanding Ground Forces in the Suez operation, sixteen years later.

action was fought around the now wrecked bridges in the bright evening sunshine from about 7 p.m. onwards. A couple of Gladiators—utterly unexpected by the men on the ground—came in out of the clear sky from the north-west (a third unfortunately crashed as it took off from an improvised runway near Bodo) and did valiant work, strafing the German infantry and gunners, bringing down two German fighters and severely damaging two more.

With their help Stockwell's force disengaged, got back to Rognan, and were ferried in small boats six miles across the head of the fiord to Langset, where the road continued once more round the north shore to Bodo itself. By the time they reformed and concentrated at Fauske, at the south-east corner of the peninsula some forty miles from Bodo, Gubbins had, with Dowler, concerted his plans for evacuation. Since it was not possible to let the Norwegians into the secret, their remaining forces in the area were puzzled and resentful at what seemed to them inexplicable behaviour.

The Germans in the meantime had reacted smartly to the presence of the Gladiators; they turned their attention from the troops in the forward area and concentrated a series of most unpleasant air attacks on Bodo itself, on the town, the docks and the airfield. Early on the morning of May 27 they went for the two Gladiators on the airstrip itself, wounded their pilots and wrecked both aircraft; and that evening a massive—massive that is by contemporary and local standards—force of a hundred bombers came back, laid almost the whole town in ashes, put the light A.A. guns out of action and smashed the runway beyond hope of repair. To Gubbins on the spot, and to Lord Cork and Auchinleck at Force H.Q., it seemed obvious that, since evacuation had been ordered, the quicker it was carried out the better; the chief concern was to get officers and men away, even if such transport and the few guns that remained had to be abandoned. It was thought advisable, therefore, to use destroyers at once, rather than wait for the aircraft carriers and the four fast liners whose arrival had been promised for June 2. It was accordingly arranged that two destroyers would embark five hundred men each at 11 p.m. on May 29 and three destroyers on the two succeeding nights, May 30 and 31, two further parties of fifteen hundred each night. The news of these arrangements, however, could not be conveyed to Gubbins until the morning of May 29.

\* \* \*

Up in the north the long-awaited, oft-delayed attack on Narvik was now delivered. It was timed to begin at twenty minutes before

midnight on May 27. The final plan envisaged a direct assault southwards across a mile of water at the mouth of the Rømbaks Fiord from Øyjord (which the French had held since May 13) by two battalions of the Foreign Legion, a Norwegian battalion and a section of tanks. Synchronized with this final assault there would be a two-pronged attack by the Poles on Ankenes and the head of the Beis Fiord to the south-east of Narvik. The combined pressure, it was hoped, would leave the Germans only one line of retreat, along the railway towards the Swedish frontier. To administer the *coup de grâce*, General Béthouart sent a company of Poles and the skiers of the Chasseurs Alpins across the mountains to seize the railway in the rear of the Germans.

For the main attack, which was to be preceded by a heavy naval bombardment of the enemy machine-gun posts on the mountain—the Taraldsvikfjell—facing the Rømbaks Fiord, the Force possessed now only three assault landing craft and two motor landing craft. This meant that the first assault party could number no more than 290 men, and that there would follow a critical interval of three-quarters of an hour before any more troops could arrive. Because the operation had been so long delayed, the warships available were neither numerous nor powerful. The Admiral used as his flagship the anti-aircraft cruiser *Cairo*, and invited Auchinleck to set up his headquarters for the operation in the same ship. She was hung overall with the largest ensigns Lord Cork could find—the White Ensign, the French and Norwegian flags, and one or two more. 'A grand display,' said Auchinleck. The *Coventry* and the destroyer *Firedrake* accompanied the *Cairo* into the Ofot Fiord for the bombardment. The cruiser *Southampton* with her six-inch guns stood farther out; and four more destroyers were in the Rømbaks Fiord. The sloop *Stork*'s task was to protect, if necessary, the landing craft from air attack; and the fighters from Bardufoss were to patrol above the combat area.

The capture of Narvik which for so many weeks had seemed so difficult and so crucial an operation was accomplished neatly and successfully. It was much less muddled than most battles, but to the commanders and the handful of senior officers who were aware of His Majesty's Government's intentions the victory was extremely ironic.

Auchinleck, Béthouart and several British and French staff officers went aboard the *Cairo* at six o'clock on the evening of May 27. It was still daylight when the British ships steamed into Ofot Fiord at eleven o'clock. Punctually forty minutes afterwards the bombardment of the shore positions began, both by the ships and by

the French field artillery. Auchinleck in his despatch described the fire as 'heavy and accurate', and under its cover the first flight of assault troops went ashore at midnight, encountering little opposition, towards the town. When the second flight were crossing the fiord a small gun to the eastward on the south shore opened up on them and had to be silenced by the Navy. By half past three one battalion of the Foreign Legion and the Narvik Battalion of the Norwegian Army were established on the peninsula. They clambered up the steep, broken side of the mountain; the Germans put in a fierce but belated counter-attack from the east, which was beaten off—but not before they had been able to bring some concentrated fire to bear on the landing beach and cause a number of casualties. One of those killed—in a landing craft, just before it reached the shore—was Commandant Paris, General Béthouart's Chief of Staff.<sup>1</sup>

The advance was resumed; two French tanks were ferried across the fiord by motor landing craft, but bogged down on the beach. And shortly after four o'clock there was a sharp change for the worse in the Allied situation. A sudden sea-fog swept in on the airfield at Bardufoss, and grounded the supporting R.A.F. fighters; but the fiords to the south were clear in the morning sun. The Luftwaffe, which ever since the establishment of Bardufoss had learned a healthy respect for the R.A.F. (in a week they had lost sixteen aircraft), saw their chance and their dive-bombers swept in to the attack. The ships, more vulnerable than the troops on the ground, were forced to take constant and laborious evasive action, which reduced such gunfire support as they could give to very little. The *Cairo* was hit by two bombs, one of them just aft of the 'top' in which Lord Cork, Auchinleck and Béthouart had their headquarters. There were some thirty casualties, killed and wounded, among the ship's company, but she remained in action. Auchinleck, compelled to be idle while others worked—a dismal experience invariably inflicted on soldiers who find themselves aboard a ship in action—commented that it was alarming and he was glad when it was over:

For nearly two hours the Luftwaffe had the air over the battle area to themselves; then—in response to an urgent message from Auchinleck—three R.A.F. fighters came back on the scene, made ninety-five sorties during the day, and shot down several enemy aircraft. General Béthouart, convinced that his troops had made a secure lodgment on the peninsula, announced that he now needed the support of no more than two destroyers. The rest of the naval

<sup>1</sup> Paris was an officer of talent, of promise and of achievement. His death, Auchinleck said, was a great loss.

forces withdrew from the fiords at half past six, and Lord Cork and Auchinleck were back in Harstad by eleven o'clock in the morning.

In front of Narvik and in the town itself fighting went on for several hours. General Béthouart chivalrously accorded to the Norwegians the chance of being first into the town as the Germans retreated. It was badly battered, the quays and warehouses were totally out of action, but there were some six thousand civilian inhabitants still living in it. The welcome which they gave to the liberating forces was not the least ironic aspect of the whole episode. Three Polish battalions took Ankenes, on the southern shore of the Beis Fiord, opposite Narvik, and sank a boatload of fleeing Germans; the second battalion of the French Foreign Legion occupied Narvik railway station; the German garrison of the town, reduced at the last to a lieutenant and about a hundred men, escaped about midday, heading south-eastwards. By ten o'clock in the evening the whole Narvik peninsula was in Allied hands, together with some two hundred prisoners, at a cost of some thirty killed and eighty wounded.

Back at Force Headquarters at Harstad, Auchinleck dictated a brief notice and ordered it to be prominently displayed:

NARVIK, FAGERNES, FORSNESET—ALL IN POSSESSION OF FRENCH BY 22.00 HOURS YESTERDAY.

Following message has been sent by General Auchinleck to General Béthouart:

'Please accept on my own behalf and on behalf of all ranks land forces warmest congratulations on magnificent feat achieved by your gallant troops yesterday. At this time your exploit cannot fail to be an inspiration to all our armies wherever serving.'

He also issued an operational instruction to Group-Captain Moore, with a very real air of urgency about it:

The operations for the capture of Narvik have been successful.

The French and Norwegians are to continue their pressure on the enemy in the area Sjødvik-Hundalen-Bjørnefjell and you should try to give them what support you can should they be subjected to heavy enemy air attack, both with the object of helping them and also of causing loss to the enemy.

Your main task, however, from now on will be that originally given to you, namely the protection of the base area Harstad-Skånland from enemy air attack.

Narvik having been captured, all energy had at once to be concentrated on the task of evacuation with the minimum possible casualties. Enemy air attacks were increasing in strength and frequency, and the situation was deteriorating rapidly on the Bodo front. At midnight on May 28-29 Auchinleck sent a staff officer down to give Gubbins details of the evacuation plan. Before this officer arrived, however, Gubbins had written a long pencilled note to Auchinleck, the gist of which was in these two sentences: 'I would be very grateful indeed if evacuation could be arranged May 31 at latest as I rather doubt I can hold till June 1. If impossible, however, we just have to do our best.'

It was a considerable relief to Gubbins to be told that the first flight of the evacuation was planned to begin that night. But into the anxieties and difficulties of this penultimate phase of the campaign there crept a real and persistent note of distaste, amounting almost to nausea, at the atmosphere of furtiveness which surrounded it, and at the sense of taking part in an act of betrayal. The official historian says that the preparations for the evacuation were 'conducted by senior British and French officers in closest secrecy and with elaborate and carefully worked out deception'.<sup>1</sup> What stuck in men's throats was the need to deceive not only the Germans but the Norwegians as well, both military and civilian. The withdrawal into Bodo town instead of any attempt to hold a defence line to the south-east had bewildered and alarmed them. It is difficult to conceive what their feelings would have been had they been aware of what in fact their allies were planning.

Auchinleck opened his heart to the new C.I.G.S.<sup>2</sup> in a long, handwritten letter on May 30.

My dear General,

I congratulate you on your new appointment, though I cannot say I envy you in present circumstances! Thank you very much for sending us the communiqués, they are most welcome. We do know now what is going on. The news from France is grim and every one is depressed by it, naturally. However, there is no sign of defeatism so far as I can see. This is a queer show into which you have put me! What with French, Norwegians, Poles and the Navy I find I have to keep a pretty wary eye on things and to cultivate a nimble tongue.

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway* by T. K. Derry, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> General Dill had on May 27 become C.I.G.S. in succession to General Ironside, who took up the post of C.-in-C. Home Forces.

I know you cannot help it, but honestly Lord Cork and I are in a pretty impossible position at the moment. Nothing to France of course, but still just a wee bit difficult. . . . The worst of it all is the need for lying to all and sundry in order to preserve secrecy. The situation *vis-à-vis* the Norwegians is particularly difficult and one feels a most despicable creature in pretending that we are going on fighting, when we are going to quit at once.

I drafted a telegram today for Lord Cork to send explaining our views on this subject and I hope the Government will agree to them, otherwise we shall be in the soup, I am afraid. . . .

Lord Cork and I get on very well. We have had no fights and won't have any, I hope.

We are both disappointed and anxious of course about this evacuation, as it is not going to be an easy job, with the enemy bombers as numerous and efficient as they are and with *no dark hours at all*. That is the real snag to all these operations. It is the very devil as you can imagine. Nothing can be concealed once you start moving.

I wish we could clean up the Germans between Narvik and the frontier before we have to come away, but I fear there will not be time, and your orders are to save the personnel with all speed. I hope the last day of evacuation will be June 7, if things go according to plan. My staff have in conjunction with the Navy worked out what I think is a good plan, but it is liable to dislocation if the enemy bombers are lucky, and there is not much margin. I'd like to think there were a few more destroyers and transports available to replace possible losses from bombing. The enemy bombing is *astonishingly* accurate even from great heights—15,000 feet. Our A.A. guns shoot away but I am afraid that they have *very little* deterrent effect, though they do keep the enemy up, except the dive bombers, who are very bold and very good. The fighters certainly help a lot, but they could not prevent a hundred big bombs on Skånland yesterday. However, things are better than they were when we were completely naked! So far the enemy has concentrated mostly on the ships and particularly H.M. ships. He will I am sure go for this place soon and *might* make it useless as a port. If he does we shall be in trouble I am afraid, but it can't be helped. I am doing my best to ensure secrecy and have already got rid of quite a lot of stuff by pretending it is going to Bodo or Tromsø, but the gaff must be blown sooner or later. . . .

It is not an easy war to wage but it is interesting enough!

I fear I shall not be able to bring back much material. I cannot

move the 3·7 A.A. guns as I must have the maximum cover for the embarkation of the personnel. I hope to get away *some* Bofors but the embarkation facilities here are lamentably inadequate, and as you know our resources in barges and landing craft of all sorts are ludicrously small. . . .

All transport will have to be left behind I am afraid. It takes much too long to load and anyway there would not be the ships to take it. . . .

I am afraid this is rather gloomy reading for you on top of all your other troubles and worries, but we are not gloomy though one cannot but be anxious! I hope you are very well and that you are getting *some* rest. The Army needs you so please do not drive yourself too hard. Easier said than done! I hope I may be able to help you make a new Army. It will have to be a very different one from our last. War has changed. We are in the same position as were Napoleon's adversaries when he started in on them with his new organization and tactics!! I feel we are much too slow and ponderous in every way. . . .

It is lamentable that in this wild undeveloped country where we, with all our wealth of experience, should be at our best, are outmanœuvred and outfought every time. It makes me *sick* with shame. The French are all right, real soldiers. As I said, our new armies will have to be very different from our old if we are going to recover our lost ascendancy in battle. That is how it seems to me.

He read the letter through carefully before he sent it off—it was as candid and as revealing as any he ever wrote—and across the top he added: 'Before you read this, please be assured that I am *not* consumed with pessimism! I am very well and in good heart! So is everyone else.'

\* \* \*

The stoutest heart was needed for this particular brae. On the day on which Auchinleck wrote his long letter to Dill, Norwegian anger and disillusionment almost spilled over. The war diary recorded, with less than its accustomed laconicism: 'Colonel Pollock rang up<sup>1</sup> from Tromsø to say considerable excitement there over Bodo evacuation which is now public property owing to complete absence of any secrecy once Norwegian forces are involved. Maybe the Norwegians will throw their hands in!!'

<sup>1</sup> Pollock had served in India. For security's sake he and Auchinleck conversed on the telephone in Pushtu.



Later that same day Pollock flew down from Tromsø and confirmed this highly disagreeable suspicion. Said the war diary: 'Government discussing Armistice with Germany. British Minister and Pollock persuaded them to do nothing precipitately, but situation obviously precarious.' Auchinleck told Pollock of the Government's decision, which had not yet been communicated to the Norwegians.

'Bodoforce' meanwhile was getting away with exemplary despatch and remarkably few casualties. The first flight of one thousand men was ferried in two destroyers to H.M.S. *Vindictive*, lying some distance out to sea, and thence direct to Scapa Flow. The transports promised for the second flight did not materialize, and some 1,300 men of the Irish Guards and the Independent Companies were taken, in three destroyers, to Borkenes, near Harstad. 'Undesirable and a waste of time,' Auchinleck commented tersely, 'but it can't be helped.' They came ashore on the morning of May 31 and when Auchinleck inspected them later in the day they seemed to him 'very tired, but in excellent heart'.

Colonel Pollock went back to Tromsø to give the British Minister the full and grim facts of the situation, to bring him back as soon as possible to Harstad, and for the time being to try to go on temporizing with the Norwegian Government. The detailed evacuation plans were agreed between Lord Cork and General Auchinleck, and given a strictly limited circulation. Accompanying the movement order, which bore the code-name of 'Alphabet', was a bleak, self-explanatory single sheet of typescript:

*To all recipients of N.W.E.F. Movement Order No. 1*

The 'story' to which all persons in the secret of 'Alphabet' will adhere will be as follows:

1. Now that Narvik has been captured it is possible to reduce the forces in that area and redistribute them to better advantage.
2. In view of the danger of air attack on Harstad the base is to be moved to Tromsø.
3. This move will make possible a reinforcement of north-eastern Norway if a German threat should develop, with Russian connivance, from that direction.
4. The true object will not be disclosed to any person other than those on the 'Alphabet' List, and paras. 1-3 are intended to guide you in answering questions, or meeting any situation which may arise with persons not on the 'Alphabet' List.

It is to be admitted that others besides the hapless Norwegians

were deceived. As the Official History has recorded: 'The Royal Marines' base organization was actually despatched from Harstad for Tromsø, redirected on the way, and its members held *incommunicado* at Scapa.'<sup>1</sup> At an early stage in this move, Captain Ridgway found himself at the quayside at Harstad and said good-bye to a friend who, embarking in a very small drifter, shouted blissfully: 'Thank God, Robin, we're only going to Tromsø. I'm a shocking bad sailor.' Little did the poor man know of the long, stormy, comfortless passage which he was to make.

Commanders and senior officers in these hazardous days were no less subject to the vicissitudes and perils of the new-style war than were their subordinates. This was as true of the retreat from northern Norway as of Dunkirk and the Battle of France. On the afternoon of May 31, for example, Lord Cork and Auchinleck set off from Harstad in two amphibious Walrus aircraft to make a tour of inspection of Narvik. After a twenty-minute flight the aircraft skimmed to rest on the dark waters of the fiord; the Admiral and the General were rowed ashore, walked around the battered town, met the British Consul and returned to the waterside to inspect a guard of honour of the French Foreign Legion. The war diary recorded reticently: 'Three enemy aircraft dropped a few bombs.'

Auchinleck's own recollection of the scene on the shingle beach was vivid and funny: 'The guard of honour disappeared behind the rocks and so did we until we were forced by the furious hails of our respective pilots to get into the dinghy and board our aircraft, which took off in a hurry and flew back to Harstad not over the friendly waters of the fiords but across the snowfields of the very unpleasant mountains at about twenty feet above the rocks.'

They were back in time to have a conference with Sir Cecil Dormer and Colonel Pollock, who had flown down from Tromsø. It was agreed that Sir Cecil should return to the temporary capital, sound out various members of the Norwegian Cabinet individually, and then, when he felt fully confident of their outlook, apprise the Government officially of His Majesty's Government's instructions. It could not have been the most satisfying of diplomatic missions. The Minister's task was complicated by a proposal advanced by Mr. Mowinkel, a former Prime Minister of Norway, and taken up by the Swedes, envisaging the neutralization of northern Norway with Swedish troops replacing the Allies in Narvik. Though the idea fortunately came to nothing, it occupied a certain amount of time and attention which could better have been given to the details

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 218.

of withdrawal, to securing the understanding if not the support of the Norwegians, and to providing them with the means, if they so desired, of maintaining guerilla resistance against the invaders.

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The campaign now entered its final phase. If inevitably its political and diplomatic facets were disagreeable, there is a real, if grimly ironic, satisfaction to be extracted from its handling as a combined naval, military and air operation. In the words of the official historian: 'The withdrawal of 24,500 troops from an improvised base and a dozen small embarkation points presented many problems.' That the majority of these problems were solved with so large a measure of success reflects credit on all concerned.

The secrecy which had been maintained had one valuable consequence: the Germans were unable to discover what was happening. They thought themselves more hardly pressed than in fact they were (the aggressive attitude maintained, under B  thouart's inspiration, by both French and Poles in the mountainous area to the east of Narvik certainly contributed to this belief), and other than from the air—and that to a smaller extent than had been anticipated—they did not interfere greatly with the preparations for or the execution of the operation.

It occupied in all some nine days from the arrival of the last British forces from Bodo on the night of May 31. There were, of course, some blunders and some hitches. Several hours before Gubbins and the third and final group of 'Bodoforce' had embarked, the B.B.C. in its noon broadcast announced, 'Bodo has been evacuated owing to enemy air action.' The war diary did not mince words: 'An act of criminal folly as final evacuation takes place tonight. Asked Lord Cork to send a strong telegram of expostulation.'

Discussion of the 'Mowinkel Plan' (Auchinleck in his despatch described it, accurately but a little uncharitably, as the 'so-called Mowinkel Plan') led, with the agreement of His Majesty's Government and of the commanders on the spot—reluctantly conceded—to a twenty-four-hour postponement of the beginning of the evacuation.

Nevertheless, an impressive number of ships, grouped as three main convoys, assembled in distant northern waters, under the midnight sun (a factor which could hardly be regarded as helpful to the Allied cause), in the first few days of June. Many of them bore famous names—*Monarch of Bermuda*, *Franconia*, *Lancastria*, *Georgie*, *Oronsay*, *Ormonde*, *Arandora Star*, *Ulster Prince*, *Royal Ulsterman* and *Ulster Monarch*. From peace-time cruises in tropic seas, from the

nightly cross-channel run from the Mersey to Belfast Lough, with the Copeland Islands and the soft green hills of County Down shining in the morning light, they had come to this strange, momentous landfall, to embark thousands of passengers whose recollections of other voyages in these same ships, however recent, wore now the incredible and mildly absurd remoteness of another life in another world.

The ships, fifteen in all, having made their rendezvous 180 miles off the Norwegian coast, came in two by two 'to sheltered waters north of Harstad, where the troops were put on board from destroyers, which worked up and down the narrow channels unceasingly to collect the men from quays and puffers'.<sup>1</sup>

The evacuation itself began on the night of June 3-4. At six o'clock the previous evening there had been established a Combined Operation H.Q., which co-ordinated the whole difficult and complicated affair with remarkable smoothness and celerity. From midnight onwards nearly five thousand men were ferried from Harstad, Borkenes and Skånland. For an hour or so Auchinleck stood on the quayside and watched. The absence of enemy interference was welcome, but by no means inexplicable. It had been brought about by a combination of luck (of which N.W.E.F. had had far less than its share hitherto) and vigilance. For the four days of the final phases of embarkation the weather was uniformly cloudy and overcast. But, as the Official History points out, 'British counter-measures were also an important factor'.

Auchinleck's determination to keep British A.A. guns in action to the last was fully justified. In addition, from June 2 onwards the *Ark Royal* was in northern Norwegian waters; her aircraft bombed German troops and lines of communication east of Narvik, and at and around Bodo; Bodo airfield, which the Germans—having themselves made a great mess of it—were trying to get into use again, was also attacked. Finally, there was the invaluable and conspicuously gallant work done by the Gladiators and Hurricanes from Bardufoss, which Group-Captain Moore, under Auchinleck's orders, kept in operation until the last man had been evacuated.

While the military withdrawal was being effected, the political and diplomatic problems which it posed were being solved. When the truth was told to them, the Norwegians reacted with generosity and courage. It is arguable that, even at some risk to security, it would have been wiser, as well as more friendly, to have taken them into confidence earlier. Auchinleck summed up succinctly in his

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 219.

despatch: 'The Norwegian high command was informed by its Government of the impending evacuation and after a very natural display of great disappointment continued to co-operate loyally to the end, although they might, with some justification, have decided to lay down their arms at once and so gravely prejudice our withdrawal. It was a trying period for all concerned, throughout which Colonel Pollock was of the greatest assistance to Lord Cork and myself; in spite of everything he managed to maintain cordial relations with the Norwegian authorities to the last.'<sup>1</sup>

Admiral Cunningham<sup>2</sup> went to Tromsø in H.M.S. *Devonshire* to bring to honoured exile in the United Kingdom King Haakon, his son, Crown Prince Olaf, members of the Government, General Fleischer and others, numbering in all some four hundred. General Rugge, the Norwegian Commander-in-Chief, remained with his troops. Auchinleck in the war diary recorded his final farewell to Colonel Finne, his Norwegian liaison officer, and added two brief sentences of comment: 'Finne was quite cordial and friendly. Am glad that this need for recent deception and lying is over.'

\* \* \*

The evacuation continued steadily and smoothly from the night of June 3-4 to that of June 7-8. The closest analogy in modern history was the final withdrawal from Gallipoli, which has been described as 'a fantastic, an unbelievable success, a victory of a sort at a moment when hope itself had almost gone'.<sup>3</sup> As at Gallipoli, not a man was left behind, and—in contrast with Gallipoli—the minimum of stores and equipment. As at Gallipoli, the enemy was to some extent taken by surprise. As at Gallipoli, after a harsh run of misfortune, the Allies' luck turned at the end.

At ten o'clock on the evening of June 7 Auchinleck came down to the quay at Harstad, where he had disembarked four weeks before. The *Ulster Monarch* and two destroyers came inshore. The last minutes of the withdrawal were covered by rear parties from the Chasseurs Alpins, the Royal Engineers and the Corps of Military Police. The fighters kept watch overhead. There was no untoward incident. At much the same time, the French rearguard in Narvik, mustering two and a half battalions, embarked in puffers which took them down the fiord to waiting destroyers, and thence to the troopships out at sea.

<sup>1</sup> Cmd. 38011, para. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Later Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cunningham of Hyndhope.

<sup>3</sup> *Gallipoli* by Alan Moorehead, p. 335.

Auchinleck watched and waited until the last man was aboard the *Ulster Monarch*. Then, with Brigadiers Gammell and Wootten and Captain Phillpotts, he joined Lord Cork in H.M.S. *Southampton*. At half past five General Béthouart left the destroyer which had brought him from Narvik and came aboard the *Southampton*, which put to sea in the wake of the transports.

Throughout June 7 the R.A.F. had flown an uninterrupted series of sorties from Bardufoss, from 4 a.m. until nearly midnight. Then, led by naval Swordfish, they flew to the carrier *Glorious*, which had accompanied the *Ark Royal* to Norway for their reception. Ten Gladiators and ten Hurricanes all landed successfully, every pilot in No. 46 Squadron having volunteered to run the risk, though Hurricanes had never alighted on deck before. But they were fated not to complete the voyage so bravely begun.<sup>1</sup>

A few minutes after midnight on June 7-8 the following Order of the Day, signed by General Auchinleck, was published by all O.C.s Troops in the transports:

Now that the North-Western Expeditionary Force has embarked for the United Kingdom I wish to express my sincere thanks to Commanders, Staffs and All Ranks of the Force for their loyal and willing co-operation on all occasions, and to express my admiration for your unfailing determination and good-cheer.

Some of you have fought under adverse conditions against the enemy in the face of strong hostile air attack. Others have worked hard at the Base to produce all that was necessary to enable the campaign to be conducted to a successful conclusion.

Thanks to the excellent work of the Air Component, the splendid co-operation of the Royal Navy and the magnificent achievements of our French Allies on the Narvik Peninsula, we were well on the way to meeting the enemy on equal terms.

But Great Britain and France are now in danger and it is for this reason that our Governments have ordered us home to help in the defence of our own countries.

Therefore, to my great regret, we have had to relinquish our task, but other and more urgent ones lie ahead.

I wish you all success, and rely upon you all to play your full part in rebuilding our Armies and so achieving final victory.

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway* by T. K. Derry, p. 220. Full accounts of the tragedy of the *Glorious* and her two accompanying destroyers, the *Acasta* and the *Ardent*, are to be found in this work and in Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. I, pp. 516-18.

The four-day passage home in the *Southampton* was not without incident, although as Sir Winston Churchill has recorded, 'the Narvik convoys passed safely on to their destinations and the British campaign in Norway came to an end'. The German battle-cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, the cruiser *Hipper* and a number of destroyers were roving in northern seas, seeking hungrily for prey; and the Narvik convoys had more than one narrow squeak. To Auchinleck, a land animal if ever there was one, this bomb-scarred light cruiser hardly seemed the right ship in which to encounter the *Gneisenau*. Lord Cork, however, true to form and to his heredity, observed when danger lowered, 'Well, General, we have had a land battle and an air battle. Now we'll have a naval battle.'

At eleven o'clock on the evening of June 9—still in full daylight—it appeared that Lord Cork's hopes were going to be fulfilled. The ship went to action stations, and the soldiers were packed off below, and given deck-chairs inside the lower compartment of a six-inch gun turret. On the ship's internal broadcast system they were given from time to time an account of what was happening. The enemy attack was concentrated on the *Ark Royal*, and the *Southampton* steamed on unscathed. Auchinleck spent most of the rest of the journey composing his report. When the *Southampton* was clear of Norwegian waters Lord Cork, regretfully but with pride, hauled down his flag as Commander-in-Chief, in accordance with Admiralty orders. She sailed safely into Greenock on the afternoon of Wednesday, June 12. Auchinleck took the night train to London to report to the War Office.

\* \* \*

His experiences in northern Norway taught Auchinleck some lessons which he set out with terse candour in his report. The first was that 'to commit troops to a campaign in which they cannot be provided with adequate air support is to court disaster'. The second was that 'no useful purpose can be served by sending troops to operate in an undeveloped and wild country such as Norway unless they have been thoroughly trained for their task and their fighting equipment well thought out and methodically prepared in advance. Improvisation in either of these respects can lead only to failure. Our preparation and provision for ensuring the comfort of the troops were magnificent, too good perhaps; it was in respect of equipment that we compared unfavourably with the enemy.'

In the full version of this report, which was completed on 19 June 1940 and was printed for the War Cabinet in March 1941, there

follow two paragraphs which were suppressed in the shortened version published as a despatch in July 1947:

The comparison between the efficiency of the French contingent and that of British troops operating under similar conditions has driven this lesson home to all in this theatre, though this was not altogether a matter of equipment.

By comparison with the French, or the Germans for that matter, our men for the most part seemed distressingly young, not so much in years as in self-reliance and manliness generally. They give an impression of being callow and undeveloped, which is not reassuring for the future, unless our methods of man-mastership and training for war can be made more realistic and less effeminate.<sup>1</sup>

These words, which are scorchingly severe, should be regarded not as a condemnation of the individuals concerned but of the outlook and *ethos* of the society which nurtured them and coddled them and then plunged them, physically and spiritually unprepared, materially and physically unequipped, and militarily untrained, into an ordeal of such a character. The decision to suppress these words was that of authority at its most typical, and was indeed a manifestation of the social *malaise* which they exposed; prim, and timorous and complacently conformist in its motives, it could only be corrosive in its consequences, for it prevented a quite fundamental criticism from being conveyed not merely to politicians, officials and soldiers but—more than seven years after the events recorded in the report and more than two years after the end of the war—to the electorate, to that very society which it was intended clearly and seriously to serve and help.

Leopold Amery, at the beginning of the third volume of his political reminiscences, dealing with the years leading up to these crucial and dramatic events, quoted: 'If the watchman see the sword come and blow not the trumpet and the people be not warned; if the sword come and take any person among them . . . his blood will I require at the watchman's hand.'

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that Dr. Derry, the official historian, had access to the War Cabinet's copy of the report, gave (see *History of the Second World War: The Campaign in Norway*, pp. 241-2) a bowdlerized version of it, and by making two points—first, that Auchinleck's experience in N.W.E.F. was 'of less than a month' and second, that he 'had only recently returned from a long term of service in India'—minimized both its force and its relevance.



## AUCHINLECK

It is a chilling comment on our society that the watchman's trumpet can be silenced, not only in the hours before calamity strikes, but afterwards when, it might be supposed, the terrible results of negligence, folly and sloth could be carefully studied, in order to prevent a repetition.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### 'Cromwell' versus 'Sea Lion'

THE England to which Auchinleck returned was a profoundly different country from that which he had left five weeks before—transformed by the impact of total war and by the emergence of resolute and courageous leadership. When Auchinleck reached London on the morning of June 13, the Prime Minister was at Tours, making a final effort to stave off the collapse of France. The new Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, had come back from France on the previous afternoon with Dill. There was a ceaseless whirl of activity in high places, but it was activity with a combative and challenging purpose. Nine days had gone by since Churchill's ringing speech in the House of Commons—'We shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender'—had set the national mood of alert and stubborn defiance. We were a people stripped to the essentials of our being, and in an irrational, illogical fashion enjoying the experience, discovering that, for a time at any rate, it was possible to live as poets and heroes.

Mutual recrimination over past failures and follies could be briefly forgotten in the overwhelming urgency of the moment; and it seemed, in that moment, that the tidal wave of German aggression would pause but briefly, if at all, before it swept across the Channel and on to English shores. When Auchinleck saw Eden and Dill on the afternoon of June 13, they both knew that the end in France was imminent; General Sir Alan Brooke, the new C.-in-C. of all British forces still in France, numbering some 100,000, spent that same day striving to get from Cherbourg to Briane, beyond Orleans, where the French Supreme Command had set up its temporary headquarters. The situation could not have been graver.

Auchinleck was allotted a temporary headquarters in Nobel House, where he found Lord Gort, the former C.-in-C. of the B.E.F., similarly installed. On the following day, Friday, he learned that the last of the Narvik convoys had safely reached the Clyde; his staff

turned up and he sent most of them away on a week-end's leave, while he himself settled down to finish his report on the Norwegian operations.

During this long, fine, hot Friday he was told that he was to form 5th Corps in Southern Command, with his present staff—a new commander and a new staff had taken over 4th Corps—and with his headquarters, for the time being, at Bhurtpore Barracks at Tidworth. But it was typical of him that his own most vivid memory of this whole period in London was a farewell lunch on the Saturday at Prunier's with General Béthouart, whose award of the C.B. had been gazetted that morning. They parted affectionately on the pavement in St. James's Street, and Béthouart, who was going back to France to carry on the fight as best he could, was on the edge of tears.

Auchinleck's report was completed, signed and presented to the Secretary of State four days later. As a senior officer of the Indian Army he paid a call at the India Office, saw the Military Secretary, General Sir Sydney Muspratt, and was taken in and introduced to the new Secretary of State, Mr. Leopold Amery, whose interest in and subsequent influence upon his own career were to be far-reaching.

\* \* \*

The mood of 1940 is an imperishable, glittering legend. The events are recorded with extraordinary sketchiness, and memories have the haphazard sharpness of a fairy-tale or a dream. However, though there was a profound and carefully masked element of romantic sensitivity in his character, Auchinleck did not romance or dream about his profession; he was realistic and far-seeing, and his realism was sustained by an infectious mixture of buoyancy, alertness and penetrating insight. It was not entirely unprecedented—for where would the country have been without the Iron Duke?—for a 'sepooy general' to rise to the highest rank and responsibility in a time of national crisis; but Auchinleck's situation during the latter half of 1940 was, in almost every other respect, unique.

The strangeness, at once actual and symbolical, of that situation can only be appreciated in the light of the threat which did not develop. Had the Germans attempted to invade England, Auchinleck would immediately have been a key figure, one of the commanders responsible for resisting the assault. He had attained this responsibility not fortuitously but as a result of his character and achievements. Yet he was quite unknown, not merely to the public at large—as were almost all the generals who became famous in

World War II—but to the British Army, regulars as well as amateurs. He was also unknown to his political masters. Remote from them by reason of his birth, upbringing and previous career, he was cut off from the close-knit hierarchy of the English ruling classes. But in this dire emergency, which showed that the country's dearth of leaders of calibre was as great as its lack of warlike equipment, Auchinleck stood out as a leader.

It was the implacable nature of the emergency which brought him forward. Men—civilians or soldiers—who had only a glimpse of him in those extraordinary months remembered the impact of his personality for years afterwards. He was the embodiment of certain national qualities which had seemed to be either submerged or lost. Yet he was not English: he was a Northern Irishman of Scots extraction—of the stock from which, consistently over more than a century, the nation's best military leaders had come. In that he ran true to form; but in much else he was exceptional.

Most important of all, he retained his critical faculty to a resounding degree. It was demonstrated with great cogency in his report on the Norwegian operations; its edge was not blunted in the months that followed. Not only did he see the military situation in sternly realistic terms; in a wider field, he had no part in and was quietly aloof from the complacent English myth. He could be cheerfully courteous; he could not flatter; and the time was too tough for trivialities. It is possible that his outspokenness now worked to his personal disadvantage later. He was a rock in tempest and trouble; and some of those who bumped against the rock were hurt, and, as will be seen, remembered their hurt many years afterwards.

When he took command of 5th Corps it was, in theory, the only operational military formation in the south and west of England. It consisted, in theory, of three Divisions, 4th, 50th and 48th; but the 48th Division, stationed in the Bristol area, was not, for the time being, under his command. In the whole of the British Isles there were thirteen and a half badly mauled divisions which had been evacuated from northern and western France and from Norway, and there were twelve more totally unequipped, raw training divisions. The exigencies of swift withdrawal from Europe had left in the enemy's hands almost all the equipment and ammunition which the Army possessed. 'Scarcely enough remained to equip two divisions. At St. Margaret's Bay near Dover—the most threatened beach in England—Churchill, a week after the fall of France, found only three anti-tank guns covering five miles of coast.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 188.

This particular beach was not in Auchinleck's command. But 5th Corps, which he had for a month, was in a precisely similar case. Alan Brooke came back from France on the day that Auchinleck went to Tidworth. Six days later, on June 26, Brooke took up the appointment of G.O.C.-in-C. Southern Command, which he had relinquished when he went to France as a corps commander in the autumn of 1939. The following day Brooke wrote:

The Command has a long way to go to be put on a war footing. . . . The more I see of conditions at home, the more bewildered I am as to what has been going on in this country since the war started. . . . The shortage of trained men and equipment is appalling. . . . There are masses of men in uniform, but they are mostly untrained: why, I cannot think after ten months of war. The ghastly part of it is that I feel certain that we can have only a few more weeks before the Boche attacks.<sup>1</sup>

The commander of his only operational corps was by no means daunted, and took it for granted that the attack would come in less than a few more weeks. On June 25, the day before Brooke took up his command, Auchinleck issued a Special Order of the Day, for distribution down to company level, which left no officer, N.C.O. or man in the slightest doubt:

1. All troops in the 5th Corps Area whether mobile or static or whether they belong to field units or instructional or other establishments are now in a forward area of a theatre of war and will act accordingly.

2. There is now no question of being on or off 'duty'. All ranks are permanently on duty and will be ready to act against the enemy at a moment's notice.

3. Commanders will impose the necessary restrictions so as to ensure that in an emergency all available personnel will be at their posts at the shortest notice fully armed, equipped and rationed for twenty-four hours.

All commanders will exercise the strictest supervision over the movement of personnel under their command and permission to leave the immediate vicinity of quarters, except on duty, will be granted only in exceptional circumstances—this applies particularly to officers.

4. All parties and detachments which leave their quarters

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 189.

for whatever purposes on duty which entails their being unable to return to quarters within ten minutes will be fully armed and in ‘fighting order’.

Working parties while at work will have their weapons under armed guard (at least two sentries) placed ready for instant use in their immediate vicinity. No civilian or unauthorized person will be allowed to approach within ten yards of such arms.

5. All despatch riders, orderlies, messengers and other individual soldiers on duty whose work takes them more than ten minutes’ distance from their quarters will be fully armed and in fighting order.

6. Soldiers granted permission to be away from quarters for purposes of recreation such as attendance at or participation in games, entertainments, etc., will proceed in organized parties with their arms and sufficient equipment and ammunition to ensure that they can defend themselves if suddenly attacked and regain their quarters without delay. When necessary these parties will be under command of officers of suitable rank. . . .

8. (a) The posting of ‘ceremonial’ or ‘peace-time’ guards and sentries throughout the Corps Area will cease forthwith. The Corps Area is now a ‘war zone’ and all guards and sentries will be posted solely for security purposes as dictated by war needs.

(b) Guards and sentries will be tactically sited and protected wherever they may be. Every guard or picket will have an alarm post which it will man in emergency. If it is necessary to make use of private or civilian public property for this purpose, it will be done through the appropriate civil authority.

Instances of lack of co-operation by the civil authorities will be reported at once to Corps H.Q.

(c) No compliments will be paid to anyone by guards and sentries. Sentries, who will invariably be posted in pairs, will make themselves as inconspicuous as possible and will not slope arms but will carry them ready for instant use. They will not march up and down on a timed beat. The fixing of bayonets by sentries is left to the discretion of commanders concerned. The two sentries of a pair will always be disposed so as to cover each other and never so that both can be disposed of at once by an enemy.

(d) Sentries whose duties demand that they shall move about will do so as if on patrol making intelligent use of cover. Flying sentries or patrols must at all costs avoid following the same track or doing the same thing in the same way twice running.

(e) Guards and pickets must be ready instantly to support their sentries or to man their alarm posts and will sleep in fighting

order with their arms at their sides protected by sentries to prevent them being surprised.

(f) No civilian or unauthorized person is to be permitted to loiter in the immediate vicinity of guards or sentries or to enter into conversation with them on any pretext whatever. When necessary the aid of the local civil authorities is to be invoked to enforce this order.

9. All troops will always carry eyeshields, anti-gas. On receipt of an Air Raid Warning eyeshields will be adjusted by all personnel in the open.<sup>1</sup>

10. It is the duty of every commander down to platoon and equivalent commanders to impress on all under their command that they are now in a forward area which may at any moment become a battle zone without notice and that their duty as soldiers comes before any other consideration and must always be in their thoughts.

Four days later Auchinleck expounded some of his immediate ideas and emotions in an urgent and secret letter to General Haining, then V.C.I.G.S.:

... I am pretty busy here making bricks without much straw. Two divisions on a hundred-mile front! However, we are getting on with it and every day makes things better, but the lack of mobile reserves is serious. At the moment we have all our goods in the front window which, in my opinion, is the right policy, as our lack of equipment and transport does not make it possible for us to fight a mobile battle in the interior. I hope we will be in a position to do so before long as equipment seems to be coming along well, though the distribution of it seems patchy and incoherent. But this may be justified by reasons beyond my ken.

Anyway, I am sure that we should make every effort to prevent the enemy landing on the beach. I still believe that this is his most difficult task, and my recent small experience confirms me in this opinion. After all, the holding of a 'line' such as the coastline cannot be likened to the holding of a 'line' or the attempt to hold a 'line' in France, which some say was the cause of our downfall.

Until he can get his heavy stuff *ashore* the enemy cannot do much. Therefore he must be prevented by all possible means from getting it ashore. At least, that is how I see it. Once he does establish himself at all securely it won't be so easy to get him out, if

<sup>1</sup> The reference to eyeshields, anti-gas, wears, in the perspective of history, a quaint air. At the time it seemed a sober realism.

experience goes for anything. Anyway, he'd be a damn nuisance if nothing worse!

By the way, there is some bazaar 'gupp' about a 'Dunkirk Medal'! which is causing some alarm amongst level-headed people. I hope it isn't true, and I can't believe it is. We do not want to perpetuate the memory of that episode, surely?

What might be appreciated, so I gather, is a '1940 Star' (France and Norway), if anything is contemplated at all, which seems to me to be unlikely. However, the gossip may interest you.

Another thing—people are still persisting in perpetuating and stressing the difference between Regular and Territorial Divisions. This, to my mind, is lamentable. If the Regulars are so much better than the Territorials (which is not *generally* true, in my opinion) then they should be used to leaven the Territorials, and not be kept as a *corps d'élite* in separate divisions. We shall not win this war so long as we cling to worn out shibboleths and snobberies. I am sure of this. Cobwebs want removing at once.

On July 9 Auchinleck held, as the commander of 5th Corps, his first and only conference of his divisional commanders and senior staff officers from his own headquarters and from Divisional H.Q. The minutes of this conference began with a statement of policy, concerted with Brooke, which breathed the same resolute and realistic air as Auchinleck's letter to Haining:

Enemy to be stopped on beaches; but maximum possible reserve to be made available for hitting enemy. Briefly—an offensive defensive.

A formation reserve to be organized as mobile striking forces for immediate counter-attacks against landings. Defence would not be passive.

War mentality must be cultivated; i.e., phrase 'IF we are attacked' should never be used; the phrase should be 'WHEN we are attacked'. Attitude of mind to be cultivated was that attack was not improbable but practically certain.

All resources, civil and military, to be co-ordinated, Army, L.D.V.,<sup>1</sup> Police, A.R.P., etc. Corps Comd stressed there must be give and take.

Army Comd had stressed necessity for countering defeatism and fostering offensive spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Local Defence Volunteers, formed in May on the initiative of Anthony Eden, and later justly famous as the Home Guard.



On this point Corps Comd added that it was easy to talk in a defeatist manner without being defeatist-minded. All ranks must think before they speak. Offenders, if necessary, should be arrested and even court martialled. Any officer who failed to behave himself as an officer must be dealt with very firmly. Offences should NOT be condoned.

L.D.V.s to be issued with Ross rifles and ammunition to release army equipment.

First reinforcements would remain with units unless formation moved considerable distance for tactical reasons.

S.A.A. economy, even in action, would be necessary.

On July 19 Brooke and Auchinleck went together on a tour of inspection of defences in the Isle of Wight. Two days before, Brooke had taken Churchill on a similar tour along the Hampshire and Dorset coasts—the 'front window' of which Auchinleck had written. Churchill's impressions of Brooke's character were those of deepening satisfaction. Now, while the two Generals sat on the beach at the southern tip of the Island eating a picnic lunch together, a message was handed to Brooke, summoning him forthwith to Whitehall to see the Secretary of State for War. When he reached the War Office that evening Brooke was told by Eden that General Ironside, at that time C.-in-C. Home Forces, was to be made a Field-Marshal, given a peerage and retired and that he, Brooke, was to take over the Home Forces destined to meet the impending invasion at once. Auchinleck was to succeed him in Southern Command, and Lieutenant-General B. L. Montgomery, D.S.O., to succeed Auchinleck in 5th Corps.

Afterwards Auchinleck felt that he had seen little or nothing of 5th Corps, and that his only legacy to the formation was its sign, a Viking ship in remembrance of its Norwegian origin. But one of his staff wrote on July 20 to his family: 'We are all very sorry to say good-bye to General Auchinleck: we always felt he was meant for something big. It is a great achievement for a man from the Indian Army to get Southern Command, as such plums are usually the preserve of the British Service.'

\* \* \*

Mercifully, it was not the time for the doling out of plums in accordance with precedent. The danger of invasion was now imminent and the whole country, however ill-equipped, was alert to it. The Luftwaffe had begun to bomb ports and harbours along the

south coast; Hitler himself still cherished his curious illusion about a negotiated peace with Britain, but the sombre and perverse logic of war was compelling him, in these first weeks of July, to put it aside—only to be resuscitated in resentful memory as he penned his last, crazily anguished testament in the bunker in Berlin not quite five years later—and to consider the prospects of the invasion and conquest of the United Kingdom.

This was the project on which Hitler's immediate subordinates were now hard at work. On July 12 Jodl prepared, and Keitel approved, an appreciation entitled *First Thoughts on a Landing in England*; to the operation which he envisaged he gave the code-name 'Lion'. On July 16—three days before he made, in an address to the Reichstag, his final 'peace offer' to Britain—Hitler issued *Directive No. 16, Preparations for a Landing Operation against England*. This document, in which the code-name was changed to 'Sea Lion' in other respects bore a close similarity to Jodl's appreciation, and the top copy was initialled by Jodl.

It opened with a statement of policy:

As England, in spite of the hopeless military situation, still shows no sign of willingness to come to terms, I have decided to prepare and, if necessary to carry out, a landing operation against her. The aim of this operation is to eliminate Great Britain [*das englische Mutterland*] as a base from which the war against Germany can be continued, and, if it should be necessary, to occupy her country completely.<sup>1</sup>

The directive ordered that the landing operation 'should be accomplished in the form of a surprise crossing on a broad front, extending approximately from Ramsgate to an area "west of the Isle of Wight"'. Preliminary actions such as an occupation of the Isle of Wight or Cornwall were to be examined and the entire series of preparations concluded by the middle of August.<sup>2</sup>

On July 21, his peace offer having been contemptuously rejected, Hitler ordered the operation to be completed by September 15, before the setting-in of the equinoctial gales. It would be, he said, 'an exceptionally daring undertaking', to which the Navy and the Luftwaffe, and the Army (up to a total of forty divisions) would be fully committed. Meanwhile, before the landing the Luftwaffe had the twin tasks of pounding the R.A.F. into submission and making

<sup>1</sup> *Operation Sea Lion* by Ronald Wheatley, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

the ports and harbours of the United Kingdom of as little use as possible to the Royal Navy.

To resist this onslaught was—on the Army side—now the responsibility of Alan Brooke and immediately subordinate to him, in a most vital sector of the threatened country, Auchinleck.

Brooke, a deeply sensitive and imaginative man, has recorded his own feelings in face of this responsibility on the day on which he assumed it:

The idea of failure was enough to render the load almost unbearable. Perhaps the hardest part of it all was the absolute necessity to submerge all one's innermost feelings and maintain a confident exterior. To find oneself daily surrounded by one's countrymen, who may at any moment be entirely dependent for their security on one's ability to defend them, to come into continuous contact with all the weaknesses of the defensive machinery at one's disposal, to be periodically racked with doubts as to the soundness of one's dispositions, and with it all to maintain a calm and confident exterior is a test of character the bitterness of which must be experienced to be believed.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck, who was just as sensitive and just as imaginative as Brooke, kept no contemporary record of his emotions at any time in these crucial months. His recollections, jotted down many years afterwards, reflected other aspects of a similar experience:

I went to Wilton House (our H.Q.). There was no hand-over beyond five minutes with Brookie—anyway there wasn't much to hand over! Wilton House was lovely and the grounds very pleasant—good trees and water. Our operations room was in the salon with the famous pictures. We had a very large map table in it of the command—Bognor to Bristol—and a sort of step-ladder platform which I used to mount to survey the lay-out. All that summer and early autumn was spent in the most lovely weather touring first of all the beaches (there were plenty of them!) and in exercises, training the troops as they came to hand. At the start there were practically none and *no* defences on the beaches. It was a strenuous time and an anxious one. We really did think invasion was coming and we had at least one code-word alarm. I remember early on, at Poole one summer morning, going down to look at the contractors' men, working on a blockhouse for

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 195.

machine-guns just below the large luxury hotel overlooking the harbour. I asked the foreman casually when he thought the job would be finished. Without any perception of haste he said, 'About six weeks, sir.' I said nowt but wondered. I thought: if it was coming it would come long before six weeks were out.

But gradually the work was done: barbed wire, under-water scaffolding, trenches, machine-gun posts, etc., and also plays like setting the sea on fire, etc.—rather fun, really.<sup>1</sup>

I had to be responsible for Queen Mary at Badminton if the Germans landed. We were supposed to bundle her off somewhere. She was grand, asked to be shown what we were doing, wanted to see something which would kill Germans! So we took her to a Sapper demonstration where they showed flame-throwers and grenades, and blew up mines. One mine threw up a lot of lumps of earth which very nearly descended on her head. She never batted an eyelid and apparently went off pleased and grateful.<sup>2</sup>

I met Ted Seago for the first time as a camouflage officer and liked him from the start. We had some fun together, camouflaging Chesil Beach. He invented a wonderful camouflage material out of horsehair, which was the best I have ever seen; but the War Office said there were not enough horses to provide the necessary hair!

It was really an anxious time and often one went to bed wondering if we would be fighting on the beaches next morning. But I liked it. One was always on the move, doing something, looking at troops<sup>3</sup> (I first met Horrocks then, commanding a brigade in the west country), or discussing defence with Regional

<sup>1</sup> One of the few wholly successful experiments, which took place on August 24 on the northern shores of the Solent, is thus described by the then head of the Petroleum Warfare Department: 'Ten pipes were rigged from the top of a thirty-foot cliff down into the water well below high water mark and ten Scammell tanker waggons connected to them delivered oil at the rate of about twelve tons an hour. Admiralty flares and a system of sodium and petrol pellets were used for ignition and within a few seconds of the pumps being started a wall of flame of such intensity raged up from the sea surface that it was impossible to remain on the edge of the cliff and the sea itself began to boil.' *Flame over Britain* by Sir Donald Banks, pp. 39-40.

<sup>2</sup> Her equerry wrote to Auchinleck next day thanking him for the 'excellent arrangements' at the demonstration at Heytesbury. He added: 'Her Majesty was immensely interested and impressed by all that she saw.'

<sup>3</sup> And being seen by them; this racy, unself-conscious narrative gives no hint of the inspiration, the sense of confidence in the Army's leadership which the briefest glimpse of Auchinleck gave to the rawest recruit, the most newly commissioned subaltern officer.

Commissioners in Reading or Bristol, or looking at the Home Guard who were really superb, wonderful chaps!

Monty had 5th Corps at Clive House, Tidworth. I used to go and listen in to his lectures—no coughing, no smoking, runs before breakfast—all very inspiring and made me feel a bit inadequate. But I doubt if runs before breakfast really produce battle winners, of necessity. However we got on, though we had one row. . . .

It is characteristic of both men that Lord Montgomery's account of their relationship in the same period should differ sharply from Auchinleck's: 'In the 5th Corps I first served under Auchinleck, who had the Southern Command; I cannot recall that we ever agreed on anything.'<sup>1</sup>

There survive three letters, written by Auchinleck to Montgomery between July and October 1940, and one from Auchinleck to the Adjutant-General, Lieutenant-General (later General Sir) Colville Wemyss. The first dealt with the fighting efficiency of 50th Division, to whose Commander, Major-General (later Lieutenant-General Sir Giffard) le Q. Martel, Auchinleck had, a fortnight earlier and just before he gave up 5th Corps, written a brief congratulatory note. His successor was more critical, and his comments brought this entirely amiable letter from Auchinleck:

My dear Monty,

Thank you very much for your notes on the 50th Division.

I agree with much of what you say and I see you realize the reasons for the present state of affairs. I think you have perhaps overstated the situation in one or two respects. For instance, to my knowledge, P.T. and drill has not been by any means entirely neglected though the time allotted to it has had perforce to be restricted. The remedy is, of course, to relieve the forward units periodically and they have already been told to do this, as you are aware.

As regards morale, I thought it was good and I still think so. No doubt a good deal remains to be done in the instilling of the offensive spirit and this can be done as training becomes more intense, consequent on cessation of work on the beaches. I want to make it quite clear, however, that I wish the instructions as to the urgent need for the completion of the defences so as to admit of the withdrawal of men for training, which I issued to the

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs* by F.M. the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, p. 71.

corps just before I left (Operation Instruction No. 14), carried out. I intend to issue a Command Instruction to the same effect.

My own estimate of the time required to get divisions ready for a major offensive overseas is about six months, assuming the necessary equipment to be forthcoming.

We have already discussed the 'drain' on manpower from divisions and I am doing all I can to stop it but orders are orders and will, of course, be obeyed. I am returning to the charge at G.H.Q. tomorrow.

I entirely agree with your estimate of the contentment and will to co-operate of the division as a whole. It is remarkable and reflects great credit on the Commander. I think in our Army there can be no true and lasting efficiency without contentment!

I am a firm believer in that saying, but this does not mean that we should tolerate inefficiency!

The other letters concerned a specific matter of organization and internal discipline on which the Corps Commander disregarded the Army Commander's explicit instructions.

On 15 August 1940, when there were many other grave issues to be dealt with, Auchinleck had to write to Montgomery in the following terms:

My dear Montgomery,

I want to draw your attention to your 84/A of August 7. In this it is stated that you interviewed the Adjutant-General on the transfer of personnel with B.E.F. experience.

There are two points with regard to this minute. I am quite aware that it is a common practice in the Army for officers of all ranks to visit the War Office, but in this case it appears that you interviewed the Adjutant-General on a matter which directly concerned my Headquarters, in that they had issued orders for certain transfers to take place. I do not consider this is the proper manner in which this, or any other matter of this nature, should be handled. When orders are issued from these Headquarters, whether they come from the War Office or direct from these Headquarters, and you wish to make a protest, from whatever point of view, against these orders, I wish such protests to be made to these Headquarters and not to War Office officials over my head.

The second point is that I think it is unfortunate that, having interviewed the Adjutant-General, special reference should be made in the memo to which I have referred above to this fact,

thereby indicating to your subordinates that you had gone over the head of my Headquarters to deal with the problem direct with the War Office.

I would like to add that the subject of transfer of personnel with B.E.F. experience from your formations to others in England had actually been made the subject of protest both by my predecessor and myself to the War Office, in order to save formations under your command from being depleted of their trained personnel, and moreover these protests were made as the result of representations made by the 5th Corps. These protests having been turned down by the War Office, there was no alternative but to issue orders for the transfers to take place, and these should have been obeyed without any further reference to anybody.

I am afraid I must ask you to cancel the memorandum in question. You will, I am sure, understand that my sympathies are entirely with you in this matter and that my object in writing to you as I have is to ensure that our common object shall not be defeated by the 'short cut' method of conducting business, which in my experience, nearly always ends in confusion, however efficient it may appear at the time.

Yrs. sincerely,

C.J.A.<sup>1</sup>

On October 19 it became necessary to take action once more. Auchinleck wrote to Montgomery again:

It has come to my notice that in your understandable desire to get the best officers available in your corps, you have been dealing direct with the branches of the A.G.'s department at the War Office, and asking them to post officers to specific appointments in your corps from units and headquarters of other formations in this Command. You will, no doubt, recollect one or two incidents.

I want you to realize that this procedure, however justifiable it may seem to you, is likely to cause extreme annoyance to the commanders of the formations and units concerned, more particularly where, in their opinion, your selections do not tally with their ideas as to who is the best man in the unit concerned for the

<sup>1</sup> It has not been possible to trace any reply to this or any other of Auchinleck's letters to Montgomery at this time; but the word 'cancel' in the final paragraph of this letter is underlined in red on the carbon copy, and 'please show me the cancellation' is below in red in Auchinleck's handwriting.

job for which you want him. I am sure that you do not mean to cause friction or to give offence, but I am afraid that, unless you first consult the commander, you will do so and I do not want friction!

I shall be grateful, therefore, if in future when you want a particular officer for a particular appointment from another formation in this Command, you will either approach me or the formation (corps) commander first. I am sure that generally your wishes can be met.

On the same day he wrote to the Adjutant-General:

You probably know that Monty, commanding the 5th Corps, is in the habit of going direct to branches of your department in order to work transfers of officers from other formations to his own corps. He has done this recently more than once I think.

I sympathize with his desire to get the best and his energy (binge, he would call it!) in making personally sure that he gets what he wants. Heaven helps those who help themselves! However, this practice tends to cause friction and I have had complaints from commanders of formations from which Monty has kidnapped officers, to the effect that his selections do not always coincide with their own ideas as to the relative efficiency of officers in the units concerned, and that, consequently, the officers passed over by these personal selections become disgruntled. I know the whole subject is a very difficult one, but I daresay you will agree that it is undesirable that this practice should become prevalent.

\* \* \*

On August 8—a day of dark memory in Göring's mind—the Luftwaffe began its concentrated attacks, intended to bring the R.A.F. to action and destroy it. For four days the enemy effort was directed mainly against Dover, Portland and the Channel convoys. On August 12 it switched to radar stations, airfields and aircraft stations in south-eastern England. To the defenders it seemed that this might well be the softening-up before the seaborne invasion. Yet while this attack was at its height, on August 10, the C.-in-C. Home Forces was summoned to a conference with the Secretary of State, the C.I.G.S. and General Wavell, who had been flown home from the Middle East for consultations. As a result of this conference, Dill, with Eden's ardent approval, wrote to the Prime Minister



that the War Office were arranging to send immediately to Egypt one cruiser tank battalion of fifty-two tanks, one light tank regiment of fifty-two tanks, and one infantry tank battalion of fifty tanks, together with forty-eight anti-tank guns, twenty Bofors light A.A. guns, forty-eight twenty-five-pounder field guns, five hundred Bren guns and 250 anti-tank rifles, with the necessary ammunition. Sir Arthur Bryant has described this as 'an intensely brave decision'. Churchill is characteristically eloquent about it: 'The decision to give this blood transfusion while we braced ourselves to meet a mortal danger was at once awful and right. No one faltered.' But Brooke at the time knew that these tanks 'constituted a large proportion of the total of my armoured forces'.<sup>1</sup>

Three days after this decision had been taken Brooke, who was touring Southern Command in the company of the Prime Minister, had an early telephone call from his headquarters informing him that 'the Admiralty had received accurate information that Germans in Norway had embarked on the night of the 11th and that they expected invasion in the north'.

Churchill, Brooke, Auchinleck and Montgomery were together for most of that day, inspecting coastal defences from Exmouth to Weymouth. In the afternoon they witnessed an air battle over Portland which might have been the prelude to a descent on the Dorset coast. Brooke's diary recorded: 'We found a German plane which had just come down. Pilot was all burned up, but, as 500-lb. bomb was in the debris which was burning we did not stop long.'<sup>2</sup>

There can be no doubt that these were the most critical—and emotionally the most exalted—weeks in English history since 1588. National leadership of the highest quality, iron resolution, daring and tactical and strategic skill on the British side were opposed, as a careful scrutiny of the history of Operation 'Sea Lion' discloses, on the German side by an extraordinary mixture of ambition and fear. The German naval authorities were cautious and (on the whole) realistic. The Luftwaffe, on which fell the brunt of the opening phases of the battle, pressed its attacks bravely and with determination, but was tactically mishandled and was outfought by the R.A.F., inferior to it in numbers but superior in morale, skill and tactical and

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 205; Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 379; *The Tanks* by Capt. B. H. Liddell Hart, Vol. II, p. 42. It is essential to realize that the despatch of these tanks meant that when Gen. O'Connor attacked in the Western Desert in December, he had 275 tanks (with well-trained crews) against the Italians' 120.

<sup>2</sup> *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 207.

strategic leadership. Hitler's intuition led him to stave off, until too late, the crucial decision to launch the seaborne assault; while he kept the invasion preparations and the invasion rumours fully in being, he sought persistently to 'achieve a decision'—by which he meant the capitulation of Britain—by other means than the frontal attack.

The responsibility of men like Dill, Brooke and Auchinleck in these weeks was to train, prepare and hold in readiness the ground forces with which to meet this attack when it was delivered. The essence of their task was the rapid conversion of the masses of civilians-in-uniform whom they commanded into soldiers. This was even more important than arming or equipping them. There was great willingness to learn, though little or none of the eagerness and fervour of the volunteers at the beginning of World War I; but throughout all sections of society, among those too young to have served in the first war, there was great ignorance, mixed with a superficial cynicism and a freely expressed contempt for soldiers and the soldierly virtues. Years of war from 1940 onwards were to weld this generation into a brotherhood-in-arms as in 1914-18 their predecessors had been welded. Auchinleck's vision of the Army of the future, which he expounded to Haining in June 1940, was in large measure fulfilled in the Western Desert, in Burma and in North-West Europe. Whether it was fortunate or not that the thousands of young civilians who, from factory bench, mill, office desk and farm stead-ing, went into uniform in those early months of World War II, were not immediately tested in battle on the beaches, in the fields and woodlands and on the rolling downs of southern England, is a question that can never be answered. It is unarguable, however, that they were raw, and their commanders knew they were.

It was natural, therefore, that senior officers should look with welcoming enthusiasm upon the Home Guard, a large proportion of whose membership consisted of ex-soldiers of World War I; and it is probable that they would have played an invaluable part in the country's defence against invasion. Auchinleck held them in high respect and paid close attention to their activities.

On Saturday, September 7, he issued an operational instruction of some length on the subject of the Home Guard, which outlined his views both in principle and in detail:

#### *Introduction*

1. The Home Guard is capable of playing a great part in the defence of the country against attack from the air or from the sea. This instruction is meant to ensure that it shall be used to the best advantage.

*Role*

2. The Home Guard forms a most important part of the land forces, but it is essentially a voluntary and localized force. Home Guards are not meant to be used far away from their homes and will not be so used.

Home Guards are not designed or armed to attack considerable bodies of highly trained and powerfully equipped enemy troops, but they are very well adapted to carry out surprise attacks and ambushes against small parties of enemy, and in properly sited and prepared positions should be able to repulse attacks by enemy troops even when these are helped by armoured cars, light tanks or light artillery.

Home Guards, by their local knowledge, are also admirably fitted to act with other troops as observers, guides, scouts and messengers.

*Tasks*

3. It follows then that Home Guards can best be used:

(a) To make and man defence works of all kinds for the local protection of their own towns and villages with or without the help of other troops.

(b) Wherever possible, to hold defences on 'stop lines' and in 'anti-tank islands' either with or without the help of other troops.

(c) To patrol beaches, possible air landing grounds, and roads near their homes on which an enemy might land or advance.

(d) To guide troops arriving from a distance to defensive positions already prepared on 'stop lines' or in 'anti-tank islands'.

(e) To act as scouts, observers or messengers within the limits of their own local knowledge for troops operating in those areas and to provide the commanders of such troops with detailed information about local conditions.

(f) To round up and destroy quickly stray enemy patrols or parties of parachutists which may land in their area, and to prevent 'fifth column' activities of all kinds, which by their local knowledge they should as well be able to do.

These activities will help the other troops in the carrying out of their tasks tremendously and cannot fail thoroughly to bewilder and dishearten the enemy.

### *Defences*

4. To make up for their relative weakness in arms and equipment, it is essential that all defence works to be manned by the Home Guard should be sited with the greatest care and cunning. An enemy is most unlikely to hit works which he cannot see however powerfully armed he may be, and it is vitally important that every possible artifice and trick should be used to hide any defences wherever they may be made. In the circumstances in which the Home Guard will have to fight, concealment is ninety per cent of the battle. No defence work should be recognizable for what it is at over fifty yards range. Much well-intentioned work which was done in the earlier stages of the battle for this country suffers from being too obvious and it is necessary now to put this right without delay. The mere sight of a sandbag is enough to put an enemy on his guard. A good deal of the earlier work is not proof against rifle fire, and is therefore an actual danger rather than a safeguard.

### *Patrols*

5. The efficient patrolling of wide-open tracts calls for training and practice especially at night. The way to avoid the ambushing of a whole patrol by the enemy and the methods of moving from cover to cover are simple and easy to learn, but if neglected will lead to casualties. It should be the constant aim of every Home Guard to avoid being killed himself so that he can kill as many of the enemy as possible. To do this he must be cunning and skilled in scoutcraft and this entails steady practice by day and night. The use of patrols mounted on horses and ponies for the patrolling of downland and common land is to be encouraged wherever possible.

6. The patrolling of roads and beaches calls for different methods but the principles are the same and only common sense is needed to apply them. Here again the object is to see the enemy before he sees you and to kill him before he kills you.

### *Guides*

7. The guiding of troops to chosen positions needs first-class knowledge of tracks and roads and a quick brain so as to admit of alternative routes being used should the direct road be blocked for any reason. The way to approach each position without being seen by an enemy needs study and practice. When the time comes, every minute may count.

### *Mobility*

8. The training of men to act as scouts and messengers needs careful attention, as unless these can get about the country quickly and cunningly they are likely to lose a lot of their value. If messengers and scouts can be provided with motor-cycles or ordinary bicycles their value is likely to be much greater.

### *Skirmishing*

9. The rounding up of enemy patrols, tanks, armoured cars and stray vehicles of all sorts is a task particularly suitable for Home Guards and one in which they should excel. For this work men should be organized in special parties trained to work together and to know what others in the party are likely to do in any given situation. This work demands a thorough knowledge of the countryside and much cunning and common sense. Parties for this work should be constantly practising the decoying, delaying and misleading of the enemy, so that they can strike quickly, silently and quite unexpectedly.

### *Drill*

10. Drill and smartness of turnout are as good for discipline in the Home Guard as in any other kind of troops, but time should not be wasted in teaching men useless movements merely for the sake of doing them. All forms of drill should be of the simplest kind and such as are needed for the work in hand. For instance Rifle Exercises might well be confined to the following movements:

- The Order
- The Trail
- The Shoulder (as in Rifle Regiments)
- The Port Arms
- The Examine Arms

While the following drill movements should meet all ordinary needs:

- Platoon in Line (three ranks)
- Column of Route (threes)

The usual formation for Home Guards on the move in action should be in single file following the section leader, until it is necessary for them to shake out into open order. Home Guards should be 'skirmishers' in the proper sense of the term and should not be tempted to become rigid and set in their methods. Their methods should be those of the 'light companies' of Wellington's day. Instructors lent to the Home Guards from other units should

bear these facts in mind and not waste their own and other's time by trying to teach all the movements and exercises set out in the drill books. Simplicity, utility and speed should be the watchwords in all forms of instruction. Home Guards should be trained to shoot to kill at short ranges, that is not exceeding two hundred yards. At this distance every shot should tell.

*Winter*

11. The enemy may not try to invade us this autumn. No one can tell how the war may go elsewhere in the world in the near future. If it goes well for us, we may early in the New Year need to send large forces of our field army abroad to carry the war into his country. Should the tide be slower to turn in our favour, Hitler may still have a fling at invasion next spring. Whichever way things go, there is no doubt at all that the Home Guards' part in the defence of this country will become more and not less important, and that they will be called on to an ever growing degree to relieve other more mobile troops of this duty. It is most important, therefore, that their training should continue all through the winter and that their strength should be maintained at the highest possible level.

*Work with the Field Army*

12. Commanders of formations and units of the Field Army and Area Commanders will do all they can to help Home Guard Commanders to train their men and will share their training facilities with them to the greatest extent possible in the circumstances. The Home Guard should be invited to take part in exercises and schemes whenever this can be arranged and soldiers and Home Guards should be accustomed to working together as part of one common army.

This instruction went out at a time when the awareness of imminent attack was at its most taut. Throughout the first week in September R.A.F. photographic reconnaissance disclosed an increasing concentration of barges and other vessels in the estuary of the Scheldt, and all along the Flemish and French coasts from Flushing to Le Havre. There was a mounting buzz of rumour on the enemy wireless and in newspapers in occupied and neutral countries. In fact, the German High Command had decided on September 21 as their D-Day; but earlier false alarms could, they believed, work to their advantage. The propaganda barrage was accompanied by what Mr. Peter Fleming has somewhat light-heartedly described as

'a shower of spies', few of them of German origin, all of low calibre as intelligence agents, and most of them speaking little or no English. All, Mr. Fleming adds, were taken into custody by the British authorities.

Inept and silly though they may have been, their arrival was regarded with becoming seriousness at the time. Brooke's diary recorded on September 7: 'All reports look like invasion getting nearer. Ships collecting, dive-bombers being concentrated, parachutists captured, also four Dutchmen on the coast.' Churchill says that their task was to be ready at any time during the following fortnight to report the movement of British reserve formations in the area Ipswich-London-Reading-Oxford.<sup>1</sup>

It was on the evening of September 7 that, as Auchinleck recalled years afterwards, the code-word alarm was given. The code-word was 'Cromwell'. There is more than one version of the way in which it was issued; the countless memories of its receipt all over the country have, in Mr. Fleming's phrase, 'greatly enriched the folklore of the period'.

Brooke and Dill had spent the previous night, Friday, September 6, at Chequers with the Prime Minister, and they motored back to London together on the Saturday. From his headquarters at St. Paul's School, Brooke was summoned to a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff to discuss a recently intercepted message about German plans for putting down an artificial fog. Just as this meeting began the Luftwaffe launched its biggest attack so far on London, personally directed by Göring from his H.Q. in northern France. At 5.30 p.m., in the mellow, golden September light, a vast armada of German aircraft appeared over the south-east coast and headed up the Thames estuary. Göring put no fewer than 625 bombers and 648 single- and twin-engined fighters into this assault, aimed at two main target areas, stretching from 'the docks in Silvertown to Hyde Park, including the South Bank, the City and the "diplomatic quarter"'.<sup>2</sup>

In the middle of this raid, which was a reprisal for the first British attacks on Berlin earlier in the week, the Chiefs of Staff went to

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 212; Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 275. These statements, in the circumstances of the time and in view of the responsibilities of their authors, properly solemn and weighty, may with advantage be compared with Mr. Fleming's hilarious account (*Invasion 1940*, pp. 185-6) of the misfortunes of this episode.

<sup>2</sup> A Luftwaffe Situation Report dated 10.9.40, quoted in *Operation Sea Lion* by Ronald Wheatley, p. 77.

another meeting at Number Ten Downing Street and Brooke went back to his own headquarters to discuss the expansion of the armoured forces. His diary continued: 'Finally dined with Bertie after sending out order for "Cromwell" State of Readiness in Eastern and Southern Commands.'<sup>1</sup>

The order went out at eight o'clock. It was sent also to all formations in the London area and to 4th and 7th Corps in the G.H.Q. Reserve. It was repeated, for information, to all other commands in the United Kingdom. The result was widespread confusion, mainly because in many formations it was received by relatively junior officers who had no clear idea of what it meant. The Home Guard, to whom it had not been addressed, acted on it with zeal and promptitude, rang the church bells, set up road-blocks and laid mines. Mr. Fleming says that it took the best part of four hours to reach troops on the coast.

Southern Command, to whom it was addressed, certainly obeyed it; but it took some time to reach formations. One example will suffice: The R.A. (A.A.) O.C.T.U. at Shrivenham—now the Military College of Science—was within the Command. The cadets were alerted a few minutes before midnight. The majority of them had been sketchily trained to act, in the event of invasion, as infantry and had been equipped with a considerable variety of weapons and vehicles. The task allotted to them was to make a light screen protecting the main Great Western Railway line and the junctions and marshalling yards of Swindon. Sections and half-sections moved to their posts in lorries, light vans, shooting brakes and station wagons. Some of the cadets had their own cars and these were pressed into service. One venerable and creaking shooting brake held six cadets—in their civilian lives they were respectively a solicitor, a Yorkshire squire, a toy manufacturer, an actor and two journalists—whose armoury consisted of a Bren gun and four Ross rifles. The driver had an officer's pistol, a relic of World War I, which he had used once in practice. The shooting brake decanted them on the edge of a copse on a spur of the Downs to the east of the White Horse. Here they remained on the alert for some seven hours, until they were recalled to barracks.<sup>2</sup> The whole episode, in the Prime Minister's view, 'served as a useful tonic and rehearsal for all concerned'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide*, by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 212; 'Bertie' was Lieut.-Gen. Sir Bertram Sergison-Brooke, commanding the London District.

<sup>2</sup> A communication.

<sup>3</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 276.



The days passed, and still the invasion did not come. The air assault on London continued with massive, ponderous ferocity. Vigilance throughout the country did not relax. On September 11 the Prime Minister broadcast a stern warning: 'No one should blind himself,' he said, 'to the fact that a heavy full-scale invasion of this Island is being prepared with all the usual German thoroughness and method, and that it may be launched now—upon England, upon Scotland, or upon Ireland, or upon all three. If this invasion is going to be tried at all, it does not seem that it can be long delayed. . . .'

The main cause of the delay was Hitler's vengeful decision to switch the weight of the Luftwaffe's attack from the R.A.F.'s fighter bases to London; London could and did take it, and the R.A.F. had the chance to re-equip and refit the fighter squadrons with the aircraft which, under Lord Beaverbrook's driving inspiration, were coming from the factories. As the days passed, Fighter Command, which had almost reached the point of exhaustion on September 6, reasserted its strength. This was the first turning point of the war, and it passed almost unnoticed at the time.

The first crucial date, September 15, went by without an invasion. On September 14 Hitler postponed a final decision until September 17; on September 17 that decision was not taken. The vessels assembled in the Channel ports were being increasingly harassed both by the R.A.F. and by the Royal Navy, and a measure of dispersal was ordered on September 19. Hitler, however, still insisted on keeping the invasion plans in being; and it was not until October 12 that he issued a directive finally renouncing an invasion, though leaving the possibility of it open for 1941.

Of these developments nobody in England knew anything. The Luftwaffe maintained its attacks on London and other cities and towns; but daylight raids proved more and more costly and the main weight of the assault now switched to the hours of darkness. The destruction and the loss of life were heavy. The ordeal was borne by the population as a whole with resolute courage; but there were signs of strain. One such was a widespread, mischievous and disruptive illusion that the Army, simply because it was not actively fighting off seaborne invasion, was idling its time away. This illusion was shared by some sections of the Press. Auchinleck, more sensitive to newspaper criticism than he afterwards became, reacted vigorously to this paragraph in the *Spectator* of September 27:

Support, I see, is being given in other quarters to the suggestion I made a fortnight ago that soldiers should be called in where

desirable to reinforce the civilian defence services. The reasons are obvious. Some of the services concerned, the air-raid wardens in particular, are working under an immense strain. They are in perpetual danger, their hours are too long and their numbers in some localities too few. At the same time there are tens of thousands of soldiers all over the country doing nothing but standing by, pending the development of more active military operations.

He sent it to Brooke with a strongly worded letter:

... I suggest that it is a most dangerous statement which should be refuted as soon as possible by the highest authority. It is also grossly unfair to the troops, who, for the most part, have really been working, and still are working, pretty hard. I have told my commanders that whenever they can, they are to give all possible help to the civil authorities in salvage work such as the clearing of debris, etc., but any large-scale use of soldiers to take the place of the civil defence services can hardly fail to have a most serious adverse effect on training.

You may know that the *Spectator* recently violently repudiated the idea that there could be any need for a large-scale offensive by the Army in this war. This new effort on its part may be connected with this theory.

Did someone have a brisk word with the Editor? This, after all, was what was needed; for it was a considerable achievement on the part of both the Government and the newspapers throughout World War II that, while there had to be censorship on matters of fact, almost all opinion, however foolish and ill-informed, was allowed to go unchecked.

The long, hot 'summer of days that danced and hearts that burst' ended in a grey, gusty autumn. Liverpool was savaged, and Coventry. Night after night until December was well advanced the German bombers droned in from the east. The Army began the serious job of training for a modern war.

One day early in November Anthony Eden came to Wilton for luncheon, and afterwards he and Auchinleck went out for a walk in the garden. Eden told him that the Government wanted him to go to India as Commander-in-Chief.

Auchinleck wrote long afterwards:

I think Leo Amery had a big hand in this, and Dill too, I

suppose. I was glad really, I think, though sorry in a way as I was *beginning* to become part and parcel of the *British*, as opposed to the Indian, Army. But it didn't look as if much was going to happen in Britain and people had begun to cease to fear invasion.

On November 21 he went to London and was officially informed by the C.I.G.S. of the appointment. When it was publicly announced, the letters of congratulation poured in—from Lord Cork, from Field-Marshal Lord Birdwood (who had himself held the same great post), from Admiral Sir William James, the Naval C.-in-C. at Portsmouth, from the Lord Mayor of Portsmouth and the Mayor of Salisbury, and from Sir Harold Butler, Regional Commissioner for the South of England. There were three especially notable letters; the first was from Alan Brooke:

My dear Auchinleck,

I was longing to congratulate you yesterday morning but I felt I must wait till you had seen Dill.

I am delighted about your appointment, but very sad that it entails losing you from Southern Command.

We shall miss you badly in 'Home Forces' but shall have to comfort ourselves with the thought that through our loss India gains the best possible selection for the appointment.

I do hope I shall see you before you leave to thank you for all your help and assistance.

With heartiest congratulations, and with best of luck.

Yours ever,

A. F. BROOKE.

The second was from Lord Gort,<sup>1</sup> who in the nineteen-thirties had been D.M.T. in India:

My dear Auk,

I have been meaning ever since the announcement was made to write and tell you how delighted I am that you will have the control of the Army in India during what may well be difficult times. We all know that nobody will do it better although, as *The Times* said, we are very sorry you will not now be available to help win our immediate struggle. I am sure you also are sorry.

<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps curious that the gossip in War Office and staff circles was that either Lord Gort or Lord Ironside would have the appointment, as it was traditionally a British Service officer's 'turn'.

## 'CROMWELL' VERSUS 'SEA LION'

You will certainly be faced with a period of military reform during your tenure of office and I daresay it may also coincide with political troubles as well. Anyhow you will know that you command the confidence of everyone in authority in this country and that will make your path easier.

Yours ever,

GORT.

The third letter was most irregular and very heart-warming. It is in the highest degree unlikely that this delightful communication passed through the appropriate channels. No answer to it was annotated or filed, but the recipient kept it for nineteen years.

H.Q. 5 Corps,  
Home Forces.  
11 Dec. 40

Dear General Auchinleck,

May we, on behalf of the Clerks of 'G' Branch, H.Q. 5 Corps, extend to you our respectful congratulations upon your appointment to the eminent post of Commander-in-Chief, India, and to express the wish that your return to India will be as comfortable as war conditions permit; that you may enjoy the best of health.

We, who had the honour to serve under you in 4 and 5 Corps—and, in some instances, in Norway—were ever conscious of your tolerance in trying conditions and of how much your genial and comprehending leadership helped to promote the *bonhomie* which we believe exists among all ranks of Corps.

Your departure was a wrench to many who felt that, despite the gulf in rank, you were always 'one of us', and while you were at Command we hoped that you still remembered that we were under your indirect control. Now that you are moving farther afield in the Service of the Empire we can only wish you 'Godspeed and good luck'. With one or two exceptions we are non-Regulares, and you made us comfortable in the Army more than you know.

Au revoir Sir.

E. R. DAVIDSON, S.S.M. (Chief Clerk Corps).

A. E. QUICK, S.Q.M.S. (Chief Clerk 'G').

Accompanied by his B.G.S., Brigadier (later General Sir Neil Ritchie,) Auchinleck went up to Scotland, where his wife had been staying since his return from Norway. His successor in Southern Command was Lieutenant-General the Hon. H. R. L. G. Alexander, who came to the post from the command of 1st Corps.

Before he handed over—there was a good deal more to hand over than he had taken over five months earlier—he issued two Special Orders of the Day, the second of which, addressed specially to the Home Guard, was characteristic both of the man and of the period:

I have had the good fortune to watch the Home Guard of the Southern Command grow from its very beginning to its present size and efficiency, and it is with the greatest regret that I now say 'Good-bye' to you.

The Germans are still in a position to launch a large-scale attack on this country, and this state of things may last for many months to come. I am firmly convinced that in meeting this threat the Home Guard will have a great and increasingly important part to play.

The more I see and hear of your work, the more sure I am that to make yourselves fit to shoulder this great responsibility you have only to go on as you are doing. I have no doubt whatever that you will.

Everywhere I go I am amazed by the originality, ingenuity and efficiency shown by all ranks. Your keenness and self-sacrifice are beyond praise and an example to all soldiers. You are now firmly established as an indispensable part of the single Army we have formed and I hope that the bond between you and the Regular troops serving side by side with you in the Command may not only be maintained but strengthened.

I thank you all most sincerely for what you have done to help me to make this part of the country secure against the enemy and I wish you the best of luck in the future.

C. J. AUCHINLECK,  
Lieutenant-General.

\* \* \*

His departure from the United Kingdom was delayed until after Christmas. By this time General O'Connor's brilliant offensive in the Western Desert, in which one armoured division, one Indian division and one battalion of 'I' tanks had thrashed seven enemy divisions, had kindled the first lamps of victory, and aroused hopes of more to come. Before he went Auchinleck was promoted to general, and in an audience with the King received the G.C.I.E.

On Boxing Day the Auchinlecks were at the Royal Bath Hotel at Bournemouth waiting to fly East. They gave a champagne dinner party, at which the guests were his two A.D.C.s, Major Sword who

was a G.S.O.2 at 5th Corps and Captain Ridgway who was a G.S.O.3 in the same headquarters. It was necessary for officers of the armed forces whose journeys in war-time took them into and through neutral countries such as Portugal to wear civilian clothes, and to be described in their passports as pursuing some civilian vocation. Auchinleck's passport described him as a 'businessman', and he had that morning been photographed in the blue lounge suit which he wore at dinner. His wife had had her passport prepared by some zealous minor official in the War Office, and it described her as 'Army officer's wife'. The possibilities of complications *en route* were hilariously examined.

The journey itself, however, was far from hilarious. The Sunderland flying boat in which they took off—Auchinleck, his wife and his A.D.C., Captain Phillpotts—from Southampton Water was blacked out even in daylight, and its course for the first four hundred miles was due west into the Atlantic. It then turned and headed for Lisbon. 'Estoril for one fantastic night, wearing mufti of course, and under assumed names,' Auchinleck observed in his notes on this journey. 'Then on to Las Palmas for another night, not allowed outside the hotel limits. Then to Sierra Leone and Lagos, where we stayed two or three days, sticky and hot, worse than Bombay in the pre-monsoon month. Then by small aircraft across Africa, Kano to Khartoum.'

In Khartoum they stayed with the Governor-General, Sir Hubert Huddleston, a man of few words and long silences. Auchinleck took the opportunity to go off to Kassala alone by air to see two Indian Divisions, 4th and 5th, who were preparing for the invasion of Eritrea, in which they were to play so signally important a part. Fourth Indian Division had, indeed, just come south from its victory in the Western Desert. He noted that he 'met a lot of old friends'.

From Khartoum they flew up to Cairo, and Auchinleck saw both Wavell and O'Connor before setting out on the last lap of his return to India. Just short of thirty-eight years had gone by since a tall, diffident lad, newly commissioned from Sandhurst, had travelled to the same destination.

## CHAPTER NINE

### India and Iraq 1941

AUCHINLECK now assumed the highest post to which, in the ordinary way, any officer of the Indian Army could aspire. The appointment and the honours which went with it were as justified as they were splendid. The whole course of his career, it might have seemed, had led naturally to this well-deserved eminence: the little boy on the sun-drowsed veranda at Bangalore, the tall young subaltern who caught the approving eye of Captain Villiers-Stuart in the ship on his way out to India in 1903, the keen and zestful regimental officer in war and peace, the staff officer and field commander of swift decision, clear, imaginative capacity and ready sympathy, the man who had had his plan for the modernization of the Indian Army in his pocket to give to the Chatfield Commission—all these had played their part in the making and moulding of the Commander-in-Chief. In addition he had a profound knowledge of and affection for India and Indians, civilians and soldiers alike; and every Indian who knew him, loved and respected him.

His merits were many and proved. The factor of luck, however, cannot be ignored. A machine-gun bullet might have killed him in Mesopotamia a quarter of a century earlier; and like thousands of others—like his own brother—he would have been remembered simply as a brave and promising young officer. He might have travelled to or from Norway in a transport that was bombed or torpedoed. The Sunderland which ferried him to India might never have made its Portuguese landfall. He had had his full share of luck; it was to be with him a little longer; and then it was to desert him.

Meanwhile, responsible as was his Command, India was still regarded, most mistakenly and by many who ought to have known better, as a backwater. Politically the country was in a phase of uneasy quiescence. The Viceroy's immediate announcement, in September 1939, of India's full participation in the war, made without prior consultation with the Indian leaders, though constitutionally correct, was still resented. The United Kingdom Government had been tepidly unenthusiastic about implementing

that decision in the opening months of the war; but this attitude changed sharply after May 1940. The vital role of Indian forces in the Middle East was now admitted—though there was still a tendency to deny them the public recognition, by honours and awards, which their services merited. The long-term potentialities of India, and other distant parts of the Commonwealth, in regard to supply and equipment were now under vigorous and realistic scrutiny by the Roger Mission.<sup>1</sup> But in general a strangely unwarlike and unrealistic atmosphere still prevailed throughout India.

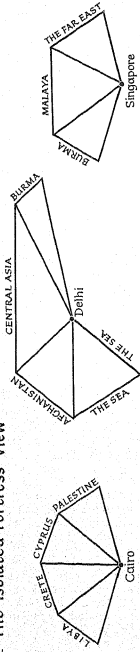
It affected Auchinleck as it had affected him on his return from leave in the autumn of 1939. But now he had the authority to change it, and his own new-minted experience of total war to give weight to his orders.

Staff officers were told to appear for duty in uniform; glittering mess-kit and dinner jackets must, for the duration, be put away in metal trunks. But India was vast, and her life was a complex mass of conventions and traditions; on an intensely and proudly conservative society India's alien rulers had imposed their own encrustation of organizational and administrative ritual. Even in this twilight of the Raj there was a wide, Victorian air of spaciousness and leisure. Travel across India's enormous distances was still at the speed of what Kim called the *te-rain*; if the Commander-in-Chief desired—as Auchinleck certainly desired—to go on tours of inspection, he had his special train, but he had at this time no aircraft at his disposal. New Delhi, that sprawling, green garden city ('designed to be lived in,' said a soured staff officer a year or two later, 'solely by Princes with Cadillacs, and then only in the cold weather') was the official capital of the country; but as soon as the temperature began to mount and there was a hint of summer's brassiness in the cloudless

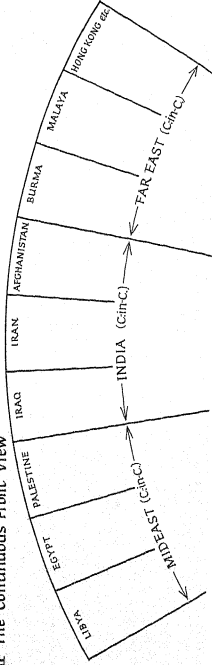
<sup>1</sup> A small body of technical experts, led by Sir Alexander Roger, an eminent industrialist, Chairman of the Automatic Telephone Company and a former Chairman of B.S.A. The Mission's terms of reference, communicated to Roger early in August 1940 by Mr. Herbert Morrison, then Minister of Supply, were initially 'to advise H.M. Government and the Government of India whether India's present output in the sphere of munitions and other stores required by the Forces can be expanded by the discovery and adaptation of existing suitable capacity, and to what extent such capacity can, having regard to the general situation, usefully be supplemented for the purposes of the present war'. The main objective, Roger was told, was 'to provide the maximum capacity to meet the requirements of a Force east of Suez'. Substantial results were to be hoped for by the middle of 1942 at the latest. Roger, with the backing of the Viceroy, interpreted his instructions broadly. One of the main results of the Mission was the setting up of the Eastern Group Supply Council.



## I The 'Isolated Fortress' View



## II The 'Continuous Front' View



sky, the whole Government of India—files, records, uncounted squadrons of clerks and *chuprassis*—went on its massive pilgrimage to the hills.

This tradition not even Auchinleck, in his first few months in office, could break. So to Simla, just as it had gone for a century and more, went A.H.Q. in April 1941, even if, as one rather necessary symbol of changed status and heightened responsibilities, Auchinleck had its title altered to G.H.Q. That Simla had its own beauty and charm, to the very end of the Raj, was undeniable. The Commander-in-Chief's house, Snowdon, had been Roberts's and Kitchener's; Kitchener, it will be recalled, had gutted it in order to redecorate it; but it was still steeped in these august memories. 'We reorganized the house a bit,' said Auchinleck, 'and prepared to settle down.'

Settling down, however, was not to be his role. It was not in accord either with his character or with the temper of the times. War, it has been observed, is a rough teacher; and India was to have many lessons in a hard school before the end of World War II. There were already visible when Auchinleck took up his post at the beginning of 1941 two threats developing against India's tranquil isolation, one to the north-west, the other to the south-east. If there was, at this time, a certain concentration of strategic attention on the north-west, on Iraq, on Persia, and on the oil-bearing region around the Persian Gulf, it was not unnatural in view of the fact that Japan, though subscribing to membership of the Axis, had not as yet declared her open hostility to Britain and the Commonwealth. It was an uneasy and menaced peace south-east of India, but it was still technically peace. But on the northern perimeter of Auchinleck's huge horizon Germany was beginning to stretch a long arm across the Balkans into Asia; it was an old German strategy in a new guise, and with certain important additions.

In the first six or eight weeks of 1941 British prospects in the Middle East theatre of war, through which Auchinleck had passed on his way to his new post, appeared bright; but it was a grimly delusive glow. On February 7, O'Connor's small force in the Western Desert completed, in the battle of Beda Fomm, the utter rout of the Italian Army, and ended the campaign which had begun at Nibeiwa and Sidi Barrani ten weeks earlier. O'Connor had never had more than two divisions—one armoured—and a proportion of corps troops at his disposal; he and they had advanced five hundred strenuous miles; they had 'totally destroyed an army of ten divisions, for a loss of five hundred killed, 1,373 wounded and fifty-five missing. The captures were 130,000 prisoners; 180 medium tanks

and more than two hundred light; and 845 guns of the size of field guns and above.<sup>1</sup> Of some 380 Italian aircraft ready for combat when the campaign began, the R.A.F. had destroyed fifty-eight in the air, and ninety-one were captured intact on the airfields by the advancing ground forces.

But on February 5, the first day of the battle of Beda Fomm, Hitler wrote to Mussolini to express his grave displeasure at the Italian conduct of the campaign, and to give notice of the German intention to intervene. On February 12 Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel, who had distinguished himself greatly in the campaign in the Low Countries and France in the previous year, arrived at Castel Benito airfield, near Tripoli. Four days later a German reconnaissance unit and an anti-tank unit went forward to Sirte; Rommel gave the Italian commander, General Gariboldi, his plans for a defensive battle in this area and assumed command of all German troops in the theatre. *Deutsches Afrika Korps* had arrived.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile the Greeks who, throughout the winter, had fought off an Italian invasion from Albania with ardour and gallantry, and had earlier refused an offer of British assistance, were now faced with the imminent threat of a German attack through Bulgaria. They therefore reconsidered their refusal of British aid; and on February 8, M. Koryzis, the Greek Prime Minister, re-affirming his country's determination to resist such a German attack at all costs, suggested that the time had come to consider whether the size of the British force that would be sent to Greece if the Germans entered Bulgaria would be sufficient, with Greek forces, to beat off the attack and to encourage Yugoslavia and Turkey to come into the conflict.

To what extent it was possible as well as desirable to aid Greece was a problem which now earnestly engaged the attention of the War Cabinet in London. It was decided to send Anthony Eden, who had just reassumed the post of Foreign Secretary, accompanied by Dill, the C.I.G.S., on a rapid but authoritative tour of the Middle East and the Balkans, with two main objects in view: to bring 'speedy succour' to Greece and to encourage both the Turks and the Yugoslavs to do all they could on behalf of the Allied cause, 'bearing in mind that the interests of Turkey were no less important to us than those of Greece'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. I, p. 362.

<sup>2</sup> On February 17 Rommel wrote to his wife: 'Everything's splendid with me and mine in this glorious sunshine.' *The Rommel Papers*, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. I, p. 374.

Eden and Dill left London on February 12; delayed by bad weather they did not reach Cairo until February 19, and Athens on February 22. They went on to Ankara and then back to Athens early in March, by which time Bulgaria had acceded to the Axis and German troops were across the Danube. The whole story of British aid to Greece is not directly relevant to this narrative; it is sufficient to point out that the total strength of the British contribution to the defence of Greece was, as a consequence of the discussions during the Eden Mission, planned to be 100,000 men, thirty-two medium guns, 240 field guns, two hundred anti-tank guns, 192 A.A. guns and 142 tanks. This was bound to entail a heavy depletion of the forces at Wavell's disposal for extending or consolidating the gains achieved in the Western Desert, for dealing with the Italians in East Africa, for holding Palestine and Transjordan, and for securing the northern perimeter in Iraq.

India, in the Second World War as in the First, could not remain indifferent to the fate of Iraq, or of Persia, or of the Persian Gulf. It was to Iraq, therefore, that the Commander-in-Chief's thoughts turned more and more frequently and more and more anxiously almost from the moment that he took up his task. If Wavell were strained beyond the limits, what would happen in this no less vital theatre?

\* \* \*

Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for India, had been largely instrumental in securing Auchinleck's appointment. Auchinleck won and returned Amery's respect, deepening into affection. The Secretary of State kept a vigilant and friendly eye on him, and was staunch in his loyalty, unstinting in his help, alert and imaginative in his advice. They exchanged letters with assiduity and candour.

Amery wrote his first letter to Auchinleck on 19 February 1941, and Auchinleck received it on March 14. It is relevant here to lay stress on the inadequacy—the tardiness and the irregularity—of communication between the authorities in London and their senior commanders in outlying theatres during the early years of the war. The transition from the era of slow, seaborne passenger and mail traffic to that of jet aircraft and instantaneous and constant telephonic contact had by no means been accomplished, but was fitfully under way. Like all phases of transition it was unsatisfactory. No communication at all, other than by letter carried in a sailing ship round the Cape of Good Hope, would probably have been better than the vexatious system which then prevailed. There was, of course, an elaborate and costly apparatus of wireless, coded signals

between London and overseas headquarters. At the highest level it tended, on the whole, to irritate and confuse rather than to assist and clarify. The Prime Minister, as his own account has revealed and this narrative is bound to emphasize, was greatly addicted to the cipher telegram. In the exercise of his massive responsibilities as Minister of Defence he used it as in the Commons he used the impromptu intervention, undisguisedly as a weapon, explosively and dramatically. But the telegram—as Churchill himself realized perfectly well—was no substitute for the letter; and the letter was a poor substitute for personal contact and the man-to-man exchange of views. Letters, like human beings, could be carried in aircraft; but the scarcity of transport aircraft, from 1940 to 1943, was even more glaring than the shortage of fighters and bombers. Therefore liaison visits were infrequent and imperilled, and letters between persons of exalted rank and heavy responsibility went to and fro over long intervals and with dismal irregularity.

Amery, a zealous and refreshing correspondent, was (as this letter shows) not unaware of this discouraging aspect of letter-writing in these years:

By the time you get this you will have had the best part of a couple of months in which to feel your feet and size up things, and I should be very glad to have your impressions of how the present first stage of the expansion of the Indian Army is getting on and what you feel about the possibilities of the next stage, what you have in mind to do and whether I can help you if help is required from this end.

I think I was not far wrong when I suggested to you before you left that you might find yourself quite as much in the thick of things in India as here. I think the Japanese definitely mean mischief and while I doubt if they will act precipitately, but rather move by stages into Indo-China and Thailand, I have a feeling that things may well come to a head between them and us by May. If so, you will no doubt have to make a big immediate effort to help Brooke-Popham<sup>1</sup> and your whole problem will in every way become more difficult and more urgent. However weak our position, I am sure it would be a mistake now to show any signs of hesitation in face of Japanese action. As long as a cat arches her back, spits and faces the dog in front of her, he will hesitate and sometimes go away: the moment she turns tail she is done for. Similarly, once war becomes inevitable, I believe we shall be wise either to attack, i.e. seize or torpedo all Japanese

<sup>1</sup> Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, C.-in-C. Far East, 1940-1.

ships we can everywhere, or at any rate take up advance defensive positions, e.g. by seizing the Isthmus of Kra and so having a narrower front to defend on land against any movement through Thailand.

On the West I hope Wavell will have cleared out the Wops from North Africa before the German push against Greece through Bulgaria becomes effective. If only the Yugoslavs and the Turks had had the courage to coerce Bulgaria and present a solid Balkan front, we could have steadily reinforced it. It will be much more difficult to reinforce the Greeks at Salonika and the Turks, especially if the Turks simply stay on the defensive and refuse to join in the war till they are invaded. It is difficult to foresee what is going to happen in that part of the world, but it may well be that sooner or later you may have to face the necessity of sending troops to Basra.

Altogether, the next six months promise to be exciting, if anxious. If we can hold our ground well during those months it will bring the end of the war much nearer. If not, we and the Americans may have a long uphill road before us.

However, I didn't mean to take up your time with these generalizations, which will be out of date by the time you get this, but just to say that I hope that when the spirit moves you you will write and tell me all about things as they strike you.

Auchinleck's reply, which he wrote on March 17, dealt lucidly with almost all the matters touched on by Amery. It also gave a clear picture of the internal military situation in India at this time, and cast at least one prescient glance outside India's borders:

... I must apologize for not having written to you sooner, but it has taken me all my time since I arrived at the end of January to get a grasp of what has been done in the last year and of proposals for the future. I am still in process of learning what the situation really is and I am afraid I am likely to stay in that state for some little time to come.

I am amazed at what has been done in so short a time, and at the ingenuity, flexibility and energy which have been shown, particularly in the production of munitions. Things are being done which two years ago would not have been considered possible in India. This is all very good I think and augurs well for the future. There is a colossal amount still to be done of course, but this is likely always to be so, I suppose.

The expansion of the Army has gone very well and wonderfully

smoothly all things considered. Here again, I am very much impressed with the results achieved and I am deeply grateful to those, including my predecessor, who are responsible for this state of affairs. I think that the moment has now come to review the position generally and make certain modifications in the original proposals. These modifications, which I am now thinking over, will be aimed at simplification of the organization generally and the prevention of the springing up of new corps and units which have no very definite purpose or firm foundations.

Generally speaking, I have found very little to quarrel with in the actual composition, organization or equipment of the new formations we are raising. Such alterations, and they are of a minor character, as I am making are again aimed at simplification. You ask for my ideas on the next stage. I do not myself think that for the moment we can look further ahead than we are doing at present. You know what present plans are. The production of formations for H.M.G. as they say they need them, and then replacement by similar formations to be kept in India for its own immediate defence. We can get the men without difficulty, I think, but one cannot go beyond a certain limit in the raising of new formations unless there is a prospect of being able to equip them within a reasonable time.

It is possible to do a lot in the training line with dummy weapons and the like, but I do not think one can keep troops in an unequipped state indefinitely.

Equipment and officers are the two bottlenecks and likely to remain as such, I think, till the end.

Equipment is coming in, steadily if slowly, and the progress made in manufacture in this country is most encouraging. I recently visited the Ordnance and other factories at Calcutta and Tatanagar and was very favourably impressed. Much more can and I hope will be done. The Roger Mission has done most valuable work out here and has presented, as you know, a remarkable series of reports. All the same, equipment is short—very short—and it disturbs me to think that I shall not have a single division in the country equipped for modern war once 'Capable' has departed for Singapore, until next July. We have certainly got troops and plenty of them which could be sent, say to Iraq to restore the internal situation in that country, and if necessary deal with the Iraqi army, but they would not be fit, from the equipment point of view, to go to Anatolia to fight the Germans! I feel more and more certain that it will not be long before we shall have to send troops to Iraq, and that this alternative L. of C.

via Basra, Baghdad, Mosul and Aleppo may become really important strategically before the war is much older. However, as you know, we are preparing for that contingency and planning has now started in earnest.

The supply of suitable 'middle-piece' officers is getting more difficult every day and I have had, much against my will, to refuse demands from Singapore for regular officers for various irregular units that they propose raising. I have always been rather sceptical (hidebound—I suppose!) of the value of these specialized small units. I feel that the officers and N.C.O.s they absorb could be of much greater value training and leading regular units on which we must rely to win the battle finally.

I am not too happy about our system for the recruitment of Indians for emergency commissions. We are getting some quite good stuff, but I feel we are losing many of the best of them. I have this in hand. Of one thing I am quite sure—we can no longer afford to differentiate between Englishmen and Indians in the matter of pay, etc. when both are doing the same job side by side. There are many anomalies which need adjusting and I am hoping to be able to do this.

The India Office have been very good in sending us out so many good cadets from home and we are correspondingly grateful. All the same, we must at our end see that we get an adequate supply of Indians, both as regards quantity and quality. I am sure we shall want them all before we have done.

The cadet colleges are working well and turning out good material. I hope to visit most of them during the next month. The 'middle-piece' officers simply are not there, so we must do the best we can without them, I suppose.

As regards recruitment for the rank and file, I have no doubt at all that, apart from any political considerations, we must broaden our basis and this was already in hand before I arrived. I propose to continue and hasten the process. There is plenty of good untouched material which we can and should use. Politically too it is, I think, essential to meet to an appreciable extent the almost universal demand for general recruitment and to give the process proper publicity.

This I hope to be able to do by reviving old units, such as the Madras Regiment and raising new regular (as opposed to Territorial Force) units to represent provinces hitherto unrepresented, such as Bengal, Assam and Bihar. This can easily be done as in some cases territorial units, which can be converted to regular units, already exist.



These units will by no means be 'for show' only. They can be made and will be made, to take their share of the work. Generally speaking, I am opposed to any further expansion of the Territorial Force as such. It is an anomaly in war time and a great complication in many ways. I hope in fact to be able to regularize most of the existing T.F. provincial units.

I don't think it will be difficult, and it will help greatly in meeting the political demand for wider representation in the Army.

The Air Force is desperately weak and worries me greatly. I hear that the Air Ministry will not agree to our fifteen squadron expansion scheme for the Indian Air Force. This is a disappointment to all of us but I realize that they cannot help themselves. We are now busy on a new scheme based on such aircraft as are actually in sight, and there are quite a number of them, though most of them are obsolescent. I feel we must expand the I.A.F. by hook or by crook as it is becoming more and more evident that we have very little hope of getting anything from outside. Even if we do not need our expanded I.A.F. in India, they may be able to lend a hand outside India and I hope they will.

The Navy is going on well and expanding with great energy. I like the looks of what I have seen of the personnel very much (the ratings) and I hope to see a good deal of them next week at Bombay and Karachi. I am off tomorrow by air to Secunderabad, Madras, Bangalore, Bombay and Karachi. I hope to do the N.W.F. and the Punjab in April. . . .

As I indicated earlier, I am anxious that the machinery of expansion shall not get out of control and overrun itself. Some consolidation and reconsideration is wanted, I think, but this need have no deterrent effect on eventual progress. I think probably it will have the reverse effect.

May I thank you for your generous help in arranging that in operational matters affecting Force 'Sabine' the War Office should deal direct with us.

'Sabine' was the code-name for an operation which had been under discussion between London, Cairo and India for many months past. It envisaged, in certain contingencies, the occupation and holding of Basra in order to protect the oilfields and installations of south-west Persia and the Gulf. The contingencies, which seemed remote enough when the planning began, before the outbreak of war, were now coming uncomfortably close; little had been accomplished except discussion about the organization and control of the expedi-

tion; and, in spite of the fact that all the constructive ideas and proposals came from India, it was obvious that the fears and the suspicions provoked by memories of the Mesopotamian campaign of twenty-five years before were still casting long, dark shadows.

But Mesopotamia had no contemporary place on the map. In its stead there was Iraq, an independent and sovereign Arab State, its relations with Great Britain guaranteed by a treaty, signed in 1930, which not only proclaimed perpetual peace and friendship between the two countries but granted Britain, in peace and in war, certain important military facilities: the maintenance of a large air base at Habbaniya, some fifty miles west of Baghdad, and in the event of an emergency the use of ports, railways, roads, airfields and means of communication to ensure the passage of troops across the country.

The strategic importance of Iraq, at the outbreak of war, was as clearly understood in Axis as in Allied capitals. It supplied fertile ground for every plot to disrupt British hegemony in the Middle East, for its history during the years of its independence had been turbulent. British officials and advisers laboured diligently to create stable conditions; but the Iraqis, and the numerous minorities within their borders, evinced no particular understanding of or liking for the benefits of political stability. A crude and violent xenophobia was endemic in the urban and literate sections of the population. One statesman of calibre who emerged, Nuri-es-Said, pinned his faith on an enduring alliance with Great Britain and strove arduously, over some forty years, to contain the wild, extremist passions of his compatriots. When he was in power there was relative tranquillity, when he was out there was trouble. If Iraq's infant parliamentary institutions were a slightly indecorous farce, her other major innovation, a constitutional monarchy on Western lines, seemed to be doomed to tragedy. The first occupant of the throne was the Hashimite Prince, Feisal, the friend and comrade-in-arms of T. E. Lawrence, who was granted it as compensation for his rough ejection by the French from his previous kingdom, Syria, and his capital, Damascus. Melancholy, chivalrous and talented, he died young, and was succeeded by his elder son, Ghazi, a foolish, ungovernable rascal who after a brief and infelicitous reign killed himself in a car accident. Ghazi's son and heir, Feisal II, was then a baby; Ghazi's brother, Prince Abdulillah, a quiet, studious youth, devoid neither of courage, foresight nor tenacity, was nominated as Regent. When the war broke out Nuri was out of power, the British Ambassador was weak and inexperienced, the Germans and the Italians had been lavish with propaganda, promises and pay, the politicians in office were anti-

British to a man, and the officer corps of the Army and Air Force (both British created and British manned) seethed with ambitious, power-hungry and adventurous politicians. The agents of the Axis had but to stir the stew-pot and trouble was inevitable. And if the enemy seized control of Iraq, the consequences for Britain, India and the rest of the Commonwealth would be dire.

Measures on the British side to deal with this threat had been leisurely, vague and irresolute. The War Cabinet, the Chiefs of Staff and (as the war developed in the Mediterranean theatre) G.H.Q. Middle East changed their minds and shifted their ground more than once; throughout 1940 there failed to emerge from any of these bodies a clear definition either of political and military intentions in Iraq or of the means to fulfil those intentions. The General Staff in India were much clearer in their minds. While General Cassels was still C-in-C, they prepared a realistic appreciation of the situation, which was available for Auchinleck as soon as he took over.

Auchinleck injected force and a sense of urgency into consideration of the issue. He was subsequently to be commended by the Prime Minister for the promptness and vigour with which India acted when the crisis occurred in Iraq. This, however, was not a sudden, last-minute response: the danger was foreseen in India far more clearly than in London or in Cairo, and such preparations as could be made to meet it were made well in advance. The credit for a far-seeing and accurate assessment of the whole situation, from beginning to end, belonged to Linlithgow and Auchinleck. The War Cabinet and G.H.Q. Middle East, on the other hand, were divided in their counsels and they aggravated their efforts to mishandle the affair by insisting, until a very late stage, on divided control for the operation. The consequence could have been a disaster not unlike the first phases of the Mesopotamian campaign in the First World War; but the energy and resolution of the authorities in India prevented history from repeating itself.

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The political situation in Iraq in the opening months of 1941 was complicated and, from the British point of view, dangerous. The dominant politician in Baghdad was a nationalist named Rashid Ali el Gailani, who was in close and constant touch with the Axis. The leader of the 1936-9 Arab Rebellion in Palestine, Haj Amin el Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, had fled to Baghdad when on the verge of arrest, and had there set up, with other

Palestinian exiles, a centre of anti-British intrigue and propaganda. He and his friends were also in contact with Axis agents, as were several groups of politically-minded officers in the Iraqi armed forces. The R.A.F. had their base at Habbaniya, its hangars housing a handful of elderly training aircraft. But there were no British ground troops in the country. Wavell, with his numerous commitments in Cyrenaica, Greece and East Africa, had no forces available to handle the threat militarily; he proposed and the Chiefs of Staff agreed that it should be dealt with by strong diplomatic action, supported by financial and economic pressure and propaganda. There was also a suggestion that a mission, headed by 'a prominent personality, known and respected by the Iraqis and likely to exercise a steadying influence',<sup>1</sup> should be sent to Baghdad. The mission was never despatched; the pressure and the propaganda were both fitful and ineffective; and in the end the only positive step taken in this field was the appointment of a new Ambassador, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, who had had fourteen or fifteen years' experience as an official and an adviser in Iraq, but had retired in 1935. The vicissitudes of war-time travel prevented Sir Kinahan from arriving in Baghdad until 2 April 1941.

By then a great deal had happened, but little that was advantageous to the British cause. Rashid Ali, who had been Prime Minister of Iraq for some nine months, resigned at the end of January 1941 but was replaced by Taha el Hashimi, an ardent pan-Arabist who was suspected (quite justly) of working in close collaboration with his predecessor. Axis money was being freely spent in Baghdad; Axis influence accordingly waxed.

On February 8 Auchinleck wrote to Wavell, saying that he was 'not at all happy in his mind' about the plans so far made for 'Sabine', either operationally or administratively.

'Time,' he said, 'is getting short and the situation in Iraq looks none too pleasant. I am therefore most anxious to clear the air on major problems as soon as possible so that we can get down to detailed planning here in India.'

On February 21, not having heard from Wavell in the interim, he returned to the charge in another letter to Wavell and one to Dill (who, in fact, was not in London but in the Middle East). To Dill he pointed out that whatever plan might be produced would very likely have to be altered at the last moment, and that such alteration would be very difficult so long as the responsibility remained with G.H.Q. Middle East. He continued:

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East*, by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. I, p. 178.

I feel that it would be far sounder to delegate the task, at any rate of occupying Basra, entirely to this Headquarters. If it were necessary at a later date to place the Force under the operational control of Mideast I should offer no objection provided I were given an opportunity of expressing my views as to the plans adopted. As A.H.Q. India will be responsible for maintenance and reinforcement, and will naturally be blamed for any breakdown, I regard this as essential.

I do not consider that the allocation of responsibility to A.H.Q. India for the control of operations outside India must necessarily involve control by the War Office being exercised through the India Office and Government of India, and I do not believe there would be any objection to communication direct from the War Office to these H.Q. on matters of major policy.

It would be necessary for me, as I do now, to keep the Viceroy informed of any matters which may affect the defence or internal security of India, or which may have political repercussions. It would naturally be easier for me to procure acceptance of proposals sponsored by myself than those proposed by someone else with which I might not entirely agree and of the reasons for which I might not be fully informed. . . .

Whatever the decision on the question of operational control it is in my opinion necessary, if the operation is considered a serious possibility, to assemble at an early date a nucleus Corps H.Q. to carry out the planning in detail. It is also essential that the officer who is to command the Force should be nominated in order that he may take charge of the preparation of the Plan of Operations. If, as I anticipate, this officer is to be found from India, I should be glad of very early authority to submit my proposals. There are a number of higher appointments which may have to be filled very shortly and I would like to be able to review this situation as a whole.

To Wavell he sent a copy of his letter to Dill, and said:

I hope you will be able to agree to my proposals as I feel sure that irrespective of what happens as regards the higher control the best place for the planning to be done is in India. . . . If it should be decided that control is to remain with you I should be very pleased to work on any directive you may care to approve.

The Official History<sup>1</sup> states: 'General Wavell had always been

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 178.

anxious not to become involved in operations in Iraq.' This is a marked understatement; Wavell was from the outset extremely averse from any involvement in Iraq. He had sound military and logistical reasons for his reluctance: his commitments were already numerous and widespread, and the decision to go to the help of Greece meant that he was to enlarge them greatly. To these practical objections there must be added another which was more subtle and more tenuous, but no less formidable. G.H.Q. Middle East had vastly expanded from its modest beginnings: by the early months of 1941 it was a huge organization, with many political and 'intelligence' ramifications, whose purpose could hardly be regarded as of direct military significance. The task of fighting the war was enmeshed, to a lamentable degree, in the tangles of Middle Eastern politics. The self-styled Middle East experts in G.H.Q., in the British Embassy and in the new mushroom organizations which were springing up all over the more salubrious quarters of Cairo, all had one point of agreement: that it would be extremely dangerous to take any step, political or military, which would hurt Arab interests or offend, however briefly, what they described as Arab public opinion.<sup>1</sup> They believed that such a step would immediately precipitate 'a general Arab uprising'. They were haunted by the fear of an Arab world in flames—against the British. Wavell shared neither their fears nor their prejudices; but he permitted himself to use their unsound political arguments to buttress his sound military objections. On March 8 he accepted Auchinleck's suggestion that if any operations occurred in Iraq they should at first be under the control of India. To this the Chiefs of Staff in London agreed.

On March 10 Auchinleck wrote to Major-General (later General Sir Edward) Quinan, who was then in command of the Western (Independent) District at Quetta:

I have just been asked by the War Office to submit the name of an officer for the command of Force 'Sabine'. This Force, as you probably know, consists of three divisions and is being prepared to go to Iraq should need arise.

I am sending in your name as the commander designate of this Force and I hope that that will please you. . . .

The C.G.S. will send you the various papers and appreciations which have been prepared in connexion with 'Sabine' and I think

<sup>1</sup> Compare the Prime Minister's long, persistent, fruitless effort, in face of the fears of these experts, to make use of the Jewish volunteers in Palestine who were eager to fight the Germans. It was entirely due to their 'advice' that the formation of the Jewish Brigade was put off so long.

that before very long it will be necessary for you and the senior members of your staff, whom I hope shortly to appoint, to go to Cairo to confer with Middle East H.Q. You will not be under Middle East H.Q. but under A.H.Q., initially at any rate, but it will be obvious to you that, should the Force go to Iraq, you as its Commander will have to work in the very closest liaison with H.Q. Middle East, and it is for this reason that I think you will have to go to Cairo before long.

I am thinking of giving you Bill Slim as B.G.S. . . . I think his recent war experience ought to be of great value to you.

This is all extremely secret at present and has not been finally approved by the War Office but I have no doubt that it will be so approved within a few days' time. Meanwhile, please keep it all very much to yourself.

There is, of course, as yet no indication as to whether the Force will ever be required to go, or if it is required to go, when it will go. As you know, the divisions composing it are now under training or about to be trained.

Three days afterwards Auchinleck wrote again to Wavell, telling him of these appointments and once again emphasizing the urgency with which he regarded the matter: 'I shall feel,' he said, 'much easier in my mind when we have got something concrete on which we can work at short notice, because I feel, myself, that with events moving at the pace they are, the notice we shall get may be very short.'<sup>1</sup>

On this same day, by a coincidence, Dill, who with Eden was in

<sup>1</sup> There was a paragraph in this letter which, read then or years afterwards, threw a lurid light on the state of India's defences at this crucial time:

'I wonder if you could possibly manage to spare us any of your captured Italian A.A. artillery, heavy or light, or both. We are frightfully short of anything of the kind in this country, in fact we really have none at all, as the only eight guns we have are all being used to train the personnel of the A.A. regiments which we are raising in anticipation of receiving equipments from home. The result is that at the ports and in our vulnerable areas where our big factories are we have no A.A. protection at all other than light machine-guns. India being what she is, it is most important that we should have something to make a noise and to show that action is being taken against attacking aircraft in order to keep the morale of the people, and especially the factory workers and workers in the dock areas, as high as possible. So long as we could get some guns it would not matter very much to us whether they only got a little ammunition; some guns with a few rounds which they could fire should an attack take place would be quite invaluable to us. I know that you must have many demands on you for these guns, but perhaps you might be able to spare us a few.'

Cairo at the end of the first half of their tour, wrote to Auchinleck:

As I seem to be a little nearer to you than usual I feel that I must write you a line. Archie Wavell and I have discussed 'Sabine' as fully as we could and are agreed, as I think he has told you, that you should do the planning and that, in the early stages at any rate, you should control. My own feeling is that the necessity for 'Sabine' will arise sooner or later—and probably sooner than later.

Conditions in Iraq are, as you know, bad and show little sign of improving. We have had that nasty little red fox, Tewfiq Suwaidi, the Foreign Minister, over here. He has been all honeyed words but is obviously quite unreliable. The Regent, they tell me, is good, but can he control or deal with the soldiers who have gone political?

In all these plans and preparations it is a race against time. The Foreign Secretary and I have had a not too easy time and it is impossible to say yet whether or not we have done any good.

The Turks are sound at heart—the Foreign Secretary had a wonderful reception from them—but will do all in their power to postpone the day when they must fight. They are woefully short of modern equipment and are, I should say, quite incapable of any offensive action. The great danger is that they will try to fight it out in Thrace, where they would be destroyed by German armoured divisions, rather than fight back to the Bosphorus where they really could hold a German advance.

Cakmak<sup>1</sup> is old and none too fit, but I fancy he is pretty wise. He and the rest of them are much more inclined to accept British advice since Archie Wavell's victories—and that is all to the good.

The Greeks are fighting and are quite determined to continue to fight even if—or I should say when—the Germans come in. Their moral [*sic*] is high at present but is apt to go up and down with incredible velocity!

The question is, what are the Yugoslavs going to do? I expect you will know by the time you get this letter.

By the way, to return to 'Sabine'. I will take up the question of your dealing direct with me, and cutting out the India Office, when I return to London. Knowing the India Office and the present S. of S. as I do, I may have some difficulty. . . .

I am delighted to know that you hold your great appointment in these difficult days. Bless you.

<sup>1</sup> Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish Army.



On March 15 Auchinleck sent General Quinan, the Commander designate of Force 'Sabine', accompanied by his own C.G.S., General Hutton, to Cairo for a planning conference. Auchinleck told Hutton to put his views at this conference in the following terms: 'I am most anxious to gain a foothold in Iraq. The sooner we begin to get control, militarily, in Iraq the better. It is very necessary to get the Euphrates tribes on our side.'

G.H.Q. Middle East on their side regarded 'Sabine' as a large, deliberate build-up, taking some three months, during which time it was hoped that a régime more favourable to the Allied cause could be established in Baghdad. Auchinleck, when he looked at the list of military requirements, all to be supplied by India, pointed out that if this was the way 'Sabine' was to be conducted, it would not be ready until the middle of 1942. However, the pace was not to be set by G.H.Q. Middle East, with its curious mixture of military optimism and political caution.

During the rest of March the situation deteriorated steadily in Iraq, and all attempts to persuade the Government to break off relations with Italy proved unsuccessful. Three senior officers in the Army—two divisional commanders and the commander of the mechanized forces—and the commander of the Air Force were knit in an anti-British, pro-Axis association known as the Golden Square. Their influence increased steadily, as did their appetite for power. The civilian politicians, Rashid Ali in particular, and the 'nasty little red fox' referred to by Dill in his letter, slithered between coming out openly on the side of the Axis and keeping in some kind of relationship with the British. Axis offers of assistance became more enticing: there were plans for Germany to buy wool from Iraq and in turn to deliver arms and railway rolling-stock. News of these parleys reached the British Ministry of Economic Warfare. On March 31 the long-expected crisis broke. The Regent got wind of a plot to arrest him; he escaped from Baghdad to Habbaniya. The R.A.F. put him on an aircraft and flew him to Basra, where he was given refuge in H.M.S. *Cockchafer*. On the night of April 1-2 the Golden Square officers mobilized their troops and compelled the Prime Minister to resign. The Chief of Staff of the Army declared that the Regent had forfeited his position by failing to do his duty. In the midst of this turmoil, Sir Kinahan Cornwallis arrived and took up his post.

On April 3 Rashid Ali, now in open alliance with the Golden Square, seized power and proclaimed himself chief of a Government of National Defence. He explained to Cornwallis that the Regent's disappearance had caused a constitutional crisis, and that the Army

as the *de facto* source of authority had asked him to take over the administration of the country temporarily, and to ensure public security pending the formation of a constitutional Government. Cornwallis, dubiety in every line of his telegram to the Foreign Office, reported that Rashid Ali had 'affirmed what he called his "fidelity to the Anglo-Iraqi alliance" and mentioned that his action had been inspired solely by consideration for the welfare of his country'.

The question now was, as the Official History has pointed out, whether to recognize Rashid Ali or not.<sup>1</sup> The Chiefs of Staff were in favour of rapid armed intervention in Iraq, but other heavy considerations now pressed upon Wavell. On March 31 Rommel, taking (as he told his wife) 'the risk against all orders and instructions because the opportunity seemed favourable', advanced in Cyrenaica, and his forward troops were in Benghazi on the night of April 3. For nearly a month there had been British forces in Greece; and the Italians were on the offensive in Albania. Only in East Africa were matters going well: Keren was taken on March 27, Asmara on April 1, and Addis Ababa on April 6.

For Wavell this was a period of supreme challenge, of a complex mingling of triumph and disaster, of bold decisions and nightmare risks, above all of overwhelming responsibility. On April 6 there was a high-level conference in Cairo, attended by the three Commanders-in-Chief and the C.I.G.S. and the Foreign Secretary, who were both about to return to the United Kingdom. Wavell announced his intentions: to hold Tobruk as a fortress, to hold the frontier about Sollum as a safeguard against any enemy attempt to eliminate Tobruk, and to put into effect the existing plans for the defence of Egypt at Mersa Matruh. The first priority in Wavell's mind was to hold Egypt, the Suez Canal and Palestine.

He had already himself gone up to the Western Desert to lend the authority and strength of his presence to General Neame, in command in Cyrenaica. On April 2-3 he sent up General O'Connor with the intention of placing him in command because of his great experience of desert warfare; then he decided that a change was undesirable at a critical moment in the battle, but O'Connor remained to help and advise Neame.

On the evening of April 6 Generals O'Connor and Neame, having spent most of the day at Neame's advance H.Q. near Barce trying to ascertain the fate of the 3rd Armoured Brigade, were motoring eastwards unescorted when they encountered a German motor-cycle patrol near Derna and were captured.

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. 1, p. 178.

Wavell flew up next morning to Tobruk, and spent the day there going into the question of its tactical defence. On his way back in the evening his aircraft had to make a forced landing in the desert west of the Egyptian frontier. He was missing for six hours. When at length he reached Cairo it was to learn that on April 6 the Germans had invaded Yugoslavia and Greece.

These numerous and grave preoccupations, and the series of calamitous misfortunes which beset Wavell at this time, must be borne in mind before he is condemned for any failure to appreciate the danger that was developing in Iraq or for any lack of resolution in countering that danger. It was by no means to Wavell's discredit that the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief in India appeared, to those in London concerned with the strategic direction of the war, to show a greater realism and vigour. Wavell's load was vast, he was tired, and he was aware that he did not have the full confidence of the Prime Minister.

On April 10 Eden and Dill returned to London. Dill, too, was extremely tired and—as he told General Kennedy, the D.M.O., who met him at Paddington that afternoon—‘frightfully anxious’ about Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, however, a new source of anxiety had opened up in London. The Prime Minister on April 8 minuted to the Secretary of State for India:

Some time ago you suggested that you might be able to spare another division from the frontier troops for the Middle East. The situation in Iraq has turned sour. We must make sure of Basra, as the Americans are increasingly keen on a great air assembling base being formed there to which they could deliver direct. This plan seems of high importance in view of the undoubted Eastern trend of the war. I am telling the Chiefs of Staff that you will look into these possibilities. General Auchinleck also had ideas that an additional force could be spared.<sup>2</sup>

Amery on the same day sent a personal telegram to the Viceroy, explaining that the situation in Iraq was critical and that everything depended on our ability to make a show of support of the Regent, even if it was only to hold Basra and Shaiba. What measures, he asked, could India take to help? A ‘chaser’ signal sent on the same evening changed the enquiry about assistance to a direct and urgent

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 225.

request for it. While the Viceroy answered London's anxious call, Auchinleck on April 10 signalled to Wavell:

Certain personal telegrams have passed between S. of S. India and Viceroy regarding despatch of (a) a force immediately to Basra and (b) a battalion by air to Shaiba. Action being taken to make this correspondence official but in meantime regard it as private and personal. Gist of Viceroy's reply as follows:

First. Propose to divert to Basra one infantry brigade and one field regiment with ancillary troops now in ships at Karachi and destined for Malaya. This force not tactically loaded so naval and air support will be necessary if landing likely to be opposed.

Second. Between 13/4 and 22/4 we will despatch one C.G. Hospital and base stores.

Third. We are convinced that force in and around Basra should be brought up as soon as possible to equivalent of at least one division. We would follow first brigade group by two further brigade groups and base units for 'Sybil'. Second echelon could probably be embarked after twenty-one days.

Fourth. We can send approximately four hundred British infantry with twelve L.M.G.s and six Vickers guns by air to Shaiba starting move 13/4 and completing in seven to eleven days.

Fifth. We are examining possibility of sending infantry brigade group later to Palestine but unless it is to have priority over troops for Basra or special shipping can be provided it will have to sail after division is established at Basra. Ends.

I understand H.M.G. would consider these proposals on 9/4. We have asked for urgent decision.

The reactions to this offer both in London and in Cairo were swift and grateful. Amery told the Viceroy: 'His Majesty's Government appreciates your immediate and most effective response to their urgent request for help in Iraq and they gratefully accept your offer. Proceed at once with the despatch of force to Basra and Shaiba as you propose.'

Wavell replied to Auchinleck immediately:

This proposal involves critical decision. It is just possible that this force might suffice to swing scale in Iraq. I am fully committed in Cyrenaica and can spare nothing for Iraq. Longmore could spare squadron Wellingtons temporarily to support landing at Basra in addition to Air Force already in Iraq.

He also told the Chiefs of Staff on the same day that he could not now spare even a single battalion from Palestine, and urged (not for the first time) that the best solution would be firm diplomatic action, possibly backed by an air demonstration. India, however, went on with the preparations for the despatch of the force. Auchinleck's directive to the commander, Major-General W. A. K. Fraser, bade him to occupy the Basra-Shaiba area and prepare to establish a base there; it also warned him that there was uncertainty over the attitude of Iraq, and that his landing might be opposed. But he was told, 'there is to be no delay or hesitation in using the utmost force necessary to achieve the object'.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile in Baghdad both Rashid Ali and Sir Kinahan Cornwallis were playing for time; but who was winning? Neither was under much illusion as to the aims of the other; but Rashid Ali was a plausible scoundrel. On April 10 he addressed the Iraqi Senate, explained that the *coup d'état* was a purely internal movement having no connexions with any foreign State, and declared his intention to honour international law and obligations, and to carry out the provisions of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty in the letter and in the spirit.

The immediate effect of this speech was a 'most immediate' telegram on April 11 to the Foreign Office (and repeated to India) from Cornwallis, hitherto an advocate of the use of force in Iraq, asking that the despatch of the airborne troops to Shaiba and Basra be held up. He believed that the speech had put Rashid Ali tactically in a most favourable position, that a secret and unheralded arrival of troops would be very difficult to justify, and that Rashid Ali would exploit it to rally the country against a threatened 'invasion'. Cornwallis also told the Foreign Office that he could see no hope for the Regent, and that the proposed force was not in his opinion strong enough to proceed beyond Basra.

He suggested, therefore, that he should be allowed to test Rashid Ali's sincerity by telling him that the general military situation required the rapid passage of troops through Iraq to Palestine, and that we were going to exercise our treaty rights and begin the movement on a date to be named.

The advantages of taking this course were, he argued: if Rashid Ali refused, His Majesty's Government would have a perfect right to take any action they thought fit and would be in a good position to counter any propaganda wail about 'invasion'; if he agreed, British forces would have gained a foothold in the country and His

Majesty's Government would be in a much better position to recover the vast amount of ground already lost.

London was disposed to accept the Ambassador's advice. The Secretary of State signalled to this effect to New Delhi and added that the Chiefs of Staff suggested that the departure of the airborne troops should be suspended and that the convoy, which had already sailed, should be held at Bahrein or elsewhere on passage.

Auchinleck's immediate reaction was of the greatest importance. He wrote on April 12 to Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, the Private Secretary to the Viceroy:

My dear Laithwaite,

I attach a copy of a telegram from the India Office which we have just received. You will have had a copy of a telegram of April 11 from Cornwallis, Baghdad to F.O. London repled Cairo and G. of I.

My own opinion is that the acceptance of the Ambassador's advice to defer action for the securing of Basra may very well result in our never getting Basra at all.

I have already informed His Excellency of my considered opinion that it is essential for us to establish ourselves in Basra so as to secure its use for us as a base as soon as we possibly can. I am convinced myself that the possession of a base at Basra may make the difference between success and failure to us in the Near and Middle East during the next six months. This being so I view with the greatest anxiety the decision of H.M.G. to postpone the immediate action proposed by us to secure it.

In my opinion, the time for diplomatic parleying has passed. I think there is a very definite danger that Rashid will use the breathing space Cornwallis proposes to consolidate his position and, probably, to invoke German aid, which might even take the form of airborne troops and aircraft.<sup>1</sup>

I am convinced that, if we are to prevent a general deterioration of the situation in Asia generally, and especially in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Arabia, we must show now that we are prepared to maintain our position by force.

I view with the gravest misgiving the proposal of H.M.G. to temporize and compromise, and I shall be grateful if you will ask

<sup>1</sup> The Official History states (Vol. II, p. 194) that a few days after Rashid Ali's *coup d'état* the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem was told that 'Germany was ready to recognize Arab independence and would co-operate against the British and the Jews if the Arabs found it necessary to fight. She was willing to supply war material if a means of delivering it could be found.'

His Excellency whether he is prepared to represent these views to the Secretary of State. I regard the matter as one of extreme urgency.

Yours sincerely,

C. AUCHINLECK.

On April 13 the Viceroy sent the following long, closely reasoned and weighty telegram to the Secretary of State for India:

We are dealing with an issue of the first importance as affecting the Middle East position. We have here, as you know, responded immediately to the appeal of H.M.G. for military assistance, and you are aware of our plans. That appeal was based on considered advice of Cornwallis. We recognize that there have been developments since. We recognize too that whole responsibility for handling this situation, and for general policy, must rest with H.M.G. who are alone able to assess the arguments and who alone have the full picture. We recognize finally that Cornwallis is well acquainted with the Iraqi position.

On the other hand, any mistake may be of crucial importance. We, here, cannot urge an assessment against the considered opinion of Chiefs of Staff. But you should know that I and my advisers are most uneasy. We feel in the first place that any delay in securing Basra may result in our failing to secure Basra at all. The importance of holding the head of the Gulf in emergency has always been only too present to the India Office and the Government of India.

Secondly, we cannot keep *entirely* secret, movements, actual or contemplated, by air or sea. Possibility that sea moves from Karachi may be East and not West helps us. But that does not help us over air moves.

Thirdly, we must pay close attention to reactions (including Bahrain and Kuwait oil) not merely on Iran, but on Arab littoral and in Saudi Arabia. H.M.G., with whom control of policy through India Office rests, will be alive to importance of those reactions. But it is our duty to emphasize them and they are directly relevant to our handling of this issue. It is out of the question for convoys to reach Bahrain or elsewhere in Persian Gulf and be held there without the whole position becoming news and any possibility of secrecy or surprise being lost.

Our own feeling, subject always to the better judgment of H.M.G. who know the whole position, is that establishment of our position in Basra on whatever plausible pretext (so as to avoid any suggestion of illegality or breach of international law) as

early as possible, is of first importance. We cannot dump troops in Bahrein or Kuwait without showing our hand and giving Axis Powers excuse for intervening in aid of Rashid Ali; and Commander-in-Chief's view is that establishment of base in Basra may make all the difference between success and failure in the Middle East in the next six months, and that it is of the first importance in terms of the position in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Arabia, that we should now take a definite line and show (with all diplomatic care no doubt) that we are prepared to maintain our position.

While decision must be for H.M.G. with their acquaintance with the whole picture, I feel no doubt myself that the definite line is the wise one. I express no view as to whether we have not been much too tender over the pre-war period with Iraq, from which we have had no co-operation that has mattered, and which essentially owes her existence to us. But we are moving into a position that affects our general standing in the Middle East, that has most important potential repercussions on India and Iran, that affects our oil supplies (so vital to the Admiralty) in Iran and in Bahrein (and to a lesser extent Kuwait); and I have no doubt that we must be prepared to take a strong line now. You can rely on all help from here, but I would ask for earliest possible intimation of H.M.G.'s views.

This advice prevailed, and on the same day the Secretary of State signalled to Lord Linlithgow that the Chiefs of Staff had agreed that the convoy should proceed as arranged. It had in fact left Karachi on April 12. The departure of the airborne contingent (the 1st King's Own Royal Regiment) was timed to coincide with the arrival of the seaborne force at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab.

On April 14 Cornwallis told the Foreign Office that, although he realized the great dangers involved, he would do his best to carry out his instructions and try to obtain a peaceful landing for the force. He urged that he be allowed to give Rashid Ali enough notice of the arrival of the force to enable him to arrange for its landing to be unopposed and 'friendly'. The Government of India agreed on condition that the warning was not such as to enable the Iraqis effectively to oppose it. Cornwallis continued gamely to play for time, and on April 15 observed to the Foreign Office that he did not trust Rashid Ali one inch and that he was not sure whether the Prime Minister's 'new-born passion' for Anglo-Iraqi amity would survive the following day's shock of being told about the imminent arrival of the convoy.



On April 16, as arranged, Cornwallis told Rashid Ali. He took the news smoothly, agreed—on the surface—that the passage of troops was a right guaranteed by the treaty, and promised to do everything to facilitate their landing.

On April 17, therefore, the first detachment of the 1st King's Own Royal Regiment was flown from Karachi to Shaiba by No. 31 Transport Squadron of the R.A.F. Next morning the first ships of the convoy arrived at Basra, bringing the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade, the 3rd Field Regiment R.A., and the headquarters of the 10th Indian Division, whose commander, General Fraser, was for the time being to assume command of all Army forces in Iraq. Before the troops disembarked Major-General G. G. Waterhouse, head of the British Military Mission to Iraq, accompanied by a senior officer representing the Iraqi Army, came on board and told General Fraser that the landing would be unopposed.

The troops landed, took over the protection of the dock area, the civil airport and the R.A.F. cantonment, established their own defences against possible attack by ground or air forces, and took measures to deal with spies and saboteurs.

Rashid Ali and his friends had been taken by surprise. They had not expected the British reaction to be as swift and as forceful. But who were responsible for this reaction? The Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief in India. The timeliness of their contribution, at this extremely critical moment in the war, has been recognized and praised; but its magnitude and its significance have been underrated. What would have happened if Cornwallis's advice in his telegram to the Foreign Office on April 11 had been accepted? The Foreign Office, the Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet were on the edge of accepting it. They were prevented from making this lamentable—perhaps disastrous—decision by the Viceroy's vigorous telegram of April 13, based on the urgent and outspoken advice offered to him by Auchinleck in his letter of April 12 to Laithwaite. This, without doubt, turned the scale.

It is significant that in all the accounts of this episode, official and unofficial, hitherto published, there has been no reference at all to any change of view between April 10 and April 13.<sup>1</sup> No mention

<sup>1</sup> E.g. *Operations in Iraq, Eastern Syria and Iran, 10 April 1941–January 1942*, despatch submitted by Gen. Wavell 18 October 1942; *Five Ventures* by Christopher Buckley; *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. II; *The Second World War* by Winston S. Churchill, Vol. III; *The Campaigns of Wavell 1939–43* by Robert Woollcombe; and *Survey of International Affairs 1939–46, The Middle East in the War* by George Kirk (Royal Institute of International Affairs).

at all has been made of the two vital documents quoted above. Seen in the light of this evidence, India's contribution—Auchinleck's and Linlithgow's—was not merely timely: it was vital. It saved the operation, and it averted an Axis occupation of Basra and the south-west Persian oil-fields, with all its catastrophic consequences for the conduct of the war as a whole. An achievement of this order should not go unrecognized.

This was certainly Lord Linlithgow's view. Over two years later, when Auchinleck was once again Commander-in-Chief, the Viceroy, just before his own departure from India, wrote him this note:

I have a strong wish that our joint endeavour in meeting the danger in Iraq in 1941 should be fully recorded in some document of a permanent character. I cannot feel confident, remembering the confusion of those times, that the story is adequately presented in any war diary. Moreover I am only too well aware of the enormous mass of material that awaits those unfortunates who will be charged with the duty of writing the Indian part of the history of this war.

Half the fun, as you'll recall, was the stubborn failure of the Foreign Office to comprehend the nature of the emergency and to provide adequate support in coping with it. But I hardly expect that that aspect can be brought out, except perhaps obliquely!

That it *was* an emergency, I have no doubt, and I think there is pretty good reason to regard the happenings of those anxious days as one of the turning points of the war.

\* \* \*

The initial advantage of surprise had been secured. But once Rashid Ali and the military clique who kept him in office had recovered from the shock, they took the offensive again. On the evening of April 18 Cornwallis sent the following telegram to the Foreign Office:

It is already evident that Iraqi Government is likely to prolong trouble and that Army leaders having been caught by surprise will now do everything they can to nullify our initial advantage. Rashid Ali though his feelings may be tempered by hopes of recognition must equally be disposed to dislike of it. He has sent me today through Adviser to Minister of Interior the following wishes or requests which were originated by Army Commander:

- (i) Our troops should be moved through to Palestine at once,

- (ii) Other troops should not arrive until after their departure.
- (iii) In future more notice may be given.
- (iv) Troops should arrive in such a manner that they can pass through quickly (i.e., presumably in small contingents).

He has also sent a message that Iraqi Government consider it important that at no time should there be any large concentration of British troops in the country. He mentioned to Adviser of Ministry of Interior (and head of Military Mission has also heard from Army sources) that Iraqi garrison at Basra may be increased to a division. The reason alleged was to maintain Iraqi prestige.

In London, the Prime Minister was now fully seized of the urgency of the situation. He minuted on April 20 to General Ismay, for the Chiefs of Staff Committee and all concerned: 'Troops should be sent to Basra as fast as possible. At least the three brigades promised should be hurried there.' And on the same day to the Foreign Secretary:

It should be made clear to Sir Kinahan Cornwallis that our chief interest in sending troops to Iraq is the covering and establishment of a great assembly base at Basra, and that what happens up-country, except at Habbaniya, is at the present time on an altogether lower priority. Our rights under the treaty were invoked to cover this disembarkation and to avoid bloodshed, but force would have been used to the utmost limit to secure the disembarkation, if necessary. Our position at Basra therefore does not rest solely on the treaty, but also on a new event arising out of the war. No undertaking can be given that troops will be sent to Baghdad or moved through to Palestine, and the right to require such undertakings should not be recognized in respect of a Government which has in itself usurped power by a *coup d'état*, or in a country where our treaty rights have so long been frustrated in the spirit. Sir Kinahan Cornwallis should not however entangle himself by explanations.

Cornwallis himself had simply told Rashid Ali that he had passed on his observations to His Majesty's Government. What he really wanted, he told the Foreign Office, was 'a quiet period during which I can get in social touch with old friends and during which inevitable opposition to Rashid Ali must grow'.

There were few indications of so agreeable a development. The diplomatic fencing, however, continued for a week or more, with Cornwallis offering hints of possible *de jure* recognition for the new Government, and thus gaining valuable time, and with Rashid Ali

playing a game of characteristic duplicity. In London the Prime Minister's natural restlessness found an outlet in prodding the C.I.G.S. to prod India into hastening the departure of the rest of 10th Indian Division. His suspicions of apathy were, however, quite unfounded: a signal from Dill to Auchinleck on April 25, reporting that 'the War Cabinet have expressed anxiety at the prospect of no reinforcements reaching Iraq before the middle of May', had minuted on it when it was sent on to the Viceroy's Private Secretary: 'It is hoped to advance date of departure of three thousand troops to April 30.'

This was, in fact, the final convoy arranged by India. The second contingent, it had already been planned, should arrive at Basra on April 29. As recognition dawned in London of the promptitude and energy of India's action, congratulations rained in. On April 26 the Viceroy had a private and personal signal from Amery:

Please convey to Commander-in-Chief and his staff my heartiest congratulations on splendid way in which they have risen to emergency over despatch of troops to Iraq. I am sure that promptitude and secrecy with which they were sent off were in no small measure responsible for Iraq incompetence in their landing. We have thus without cost of life made sure of what is likely to be a vital base for future. Whatever may follow I am confident that job so well begun will be equally well continued.

Linlithgow added: 'I associate myself in the fullest degree with this well-merited praise of admirable work done by you and your staff.' On the following day praise came from an even higher source:

*Prime Minister for General Auchinleck*

We are greatly obliged to you for the alacrity with which you have improved on your previous arrangements.

Cornwallis refrained from telling Rashid Ali until April 28 that the second convoy was due to reach Basra on the 29th. The Iraqi Prime Minister's reception of this news was far from helpful. He had been strengthened—or he thought that he had been strengthened—in his resistance to British demands by a secret treaty which he had signed three days earlier with Axis representatives in Baghdad.<sup>1</sup> He refused

<sup>1</sup> There were eleven articles in the treaty; they guaranteed substantial financial aid to Iraq from Italy and Germany in the conduct of a war against the British Empire, and the recognition by the Axis Powers of a United Kingdom of Syria and Iraq under the King of Iraq. In return, they exacted some remarkable concessions.

to agree to the disembarkation of the troops in this convoy, and remained adamant in his refusal. Cornwallis told him in no uncertain terms that the landing would proceed and that he and his Government would be held responsible for any incident that might result from the intransigence. His Majesty's Government and the Government of India were united in their support of this firm attitude; but it was clear that matters were now coming to a head. A.R.F. Headquarters in Iraq, which were at Habbaniya, sent out a brief, ominous situation report on April 29, which reached India late that afternoon:

Situation grave owing to Iraqi Government's firm refusal to allow further ships to arrive until corresponding number of troops have moved along L. of C. Ambassador under impression Iraqi attitude is not bluff and may mean definite promise Axis support. Unmistakable signs treaty may be repudiated. Ambassador asking Rashid Ali this morning for safe conduct women and children from Baghdad to Habbaniya with further evacuation by air to Basra and thence by air to India. Three D.C.2 aircraft now transporting troops Habbaniya are being retained for this purpose.

Rashid Ali gave his promise of safe conduct, and during that afternoon about 240 British women and children were sent by road to Habbaniya. No more could be despatched, however, because of Iraqi troop movements on a large scale along the same road. Tempers were rising in Baghdad itself: an explosion was obviously imminent. About 350 British subjects, of many races, took shelter in the Embassy, and the American Legation gave hospitality to about 150 more. Finding Basra too hard a nut to crack, Rashid Ali—whether under Axis advice or not is unknown—had decided to make life as difficult as possible for the Embassy in Baghdad and to deliver an outright attack on Habbaniya.

However, this was to prove almost as tough as Basra, largely because of the foresight and courage of the A.O.C., Air Vice-Marshal H. G. Smart. Habbaniya was a comfortably equipped, well laid-out station, excellent as a flying school and staging post in peace time, but not constructed to resist siege by powerful ground and air forces. It lay on the south bank of the Euphrates, between the river and the large Habbaniya lake which was used as an alighting area for flying boats, both R.A.F. and B.O.A.C. The cantonment and the airfield were both completely overlooked from

a plateau, which was occupied on the night of April 29-30 by two battalions of Iraqi infantry with accompanying artillery. There was an iron fence, some seven miles long, around the cantonment and the airfield. Within this perimeter there were numerous installations and a sizeable population, combatant and non-combatant: No. 4 Service Flying Training School, an aircraft depot, repair shops, a supply depot, fuel and ammunition stores and a hospital, about one thousand airmen, twelve hundred Iraqi and Assyrian levies, and some nine thousand civilians—European, Indian and Assyrian. Smart had no artillery at his disposal, and of his eighty-two aircraft all were either obsolete or of a purely training type, except for six Gladiators which had been sent to him as reinforcements earlier in the month. He had eighteen R.A.F. armoured cars, and after April 27 about three hundred of the K.O.R.R. who were flown up from Shaiba. Command of these ground forces was assumed by Colonel (later General Sir Ouvry) Roberts, of the staff of 10th Indian Division, who flew up from Basra to examine the situation and decided to remain.

At 3 a.m. on April 30 the Embassy in Baghdad reported that large bodies of Iraqi troops were moving westwards from the city, towards the road bridge over the Euphrates at Falluja, and towards Habbaniya. Fifty minutes later Smart signalled to the Ambassador, giving him the text of a message received from the O.C. of the Mechanized Unit of the Iraqi Army: 'Whilst training we have occupied Habbaniya Hills. Please make no flying from or the going out of any forces or any persons from your cantonment. If any aircraft or armoured car attempt to go out, it will be shelled by our batteries, and we shall not be responsible for it.' Smart in his answer to this communication, which he also reported to the Embassy, pointed out that the action taken was in direct contravention of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, that he would continue to carry out normal flying and general training, and that any interference by Iraqi forces would be considered an act of war and countered accordingly.

At 8.55 a.m. Smart sent another signal. Habbaniya, he said, was now entirely surrounded by Iraqi forces with tanks. Armoured cars and guns were trained on the camp. There was a steady flow of reinforcements, and Falluja was occupied by Iraqi troops. He had had a second message from the Iraqi commander, which accused the British of contravening the treaty, and reiterated the refusal to permit flying or ground training by British forces.

Smart's telegram concluded: 'Intention appears to immobilize Habbaniya and use as a political lever. I considered alternative of

issuing ultimatum for withdrawal but in view of policy to date and improbability of early reinforcements this area decided to defer taking offensive action until Iraqis open fire. Request immediate directive and possibility of immediate reinforcements.'

Throughout the whole of that day and the next the situation remained extremely tense, but there was no fighting. On May 1 Smart got some reinforcements and his directive.

The A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East ordered eighteen Wellingtons from Egypt to Shaiba; but with the notable exception of this prompt help by the R.A.F. there was continued and manifest reluctance on the part of the authorities in the Middle East to take any forceful action. The gravity of the position was, at this moment, much more clearly appreciated in London and in Delhi than in Cairo.

During the afternoon of April 30 Auchinleck signalled to Middle East, to the War Office, to the Ambassador in Baghdad and to Force H.Q. in Basra: 'We consider air action should be taken immediately against Iraqi forces threatening Habbaniya.'

At 5.25 a.m. on May 1 the Foreign Office sent this message to Cornwallis: 'Position must be restored. Iraqi troops must be withdrawn without delay. You have full authority to take any steps you think necessary to ensure this, including air attack on these troops. Air Officer Commanding must act on his own authority if you have no quick direct communication with him.'

This was followed by a short, characteristic and decisive telegram direct from the Prime Minister to Air Vice-Marshal Smart: 'If you have to strike strike hard. Use all necessary force.'

At 6.20 p.m. on the same day Auchinleck authorized the despatch of the following message to Wavell: 'General Fraser now reports that he has assumed command in Iraq from A.O.C. and in accordance with the decision of H.M.G. responsibility for defence of British interests in that country now rests primarily with C.-in-C. in India. General Quinan will take over from General Fraser on approximately May 6. General Fraser is therefore the responsible adviser of H.M.G., of the Ambassador and of India on all matters of defence policy but will maintain the closest possible consultation with A.O.C. Iraq.'

This swift and necessary assumption of authority by Auchinleck was accepted by Wavell and by the Chiefs of Staff—but only for the time being. Meanwhile Smart, whose courage and resourcefulness appear to have strengthened in proportion to the increasing gravity of his situation, decided that at 2.45 a.m. on the following morning he would inform the local Iraqi commander that if his forces were

not withdrawn forthwith, air action would be taken immediately.<sup>1</sup>

There was no response to this ultimatum. So 'in the uncertain half-light which preceded the dawn of May 2 every aircraft which could be coaxed into the air taxied out on to the runways and took off to attack the Iraqi positions. . . . Orders were to drive the Iraqi forces beyond artillery range of the cantonment, and targets were given the following priority: guns, tanks, armoured cars, transport columns, troops.'<sup>2</sup>

Thirty-three of the quaintly assorted aircraft from Habbaniya were joined by eight Wellingtons from Shaiba. At 5 a.m. they began to bomb the Iraqis on the plateau; and less than a minute later the first Iraqi shells hit the cantonment. The battle continued throughout that day and for three days thereafter. It was extremely unconventional but it had far-reaching effects. On the first day there were 193 R.A.F. sorties; five of the Flying School's aircraft were destroyed and several others put out of action. During the morning Iraqi Air Force fighters joined in, without much effect. Inside the cantonment the artillery bombardment killed thirteen and wounded twenty-nine, nine of whom were civilians; disagreeable as this bombardment was, it was a good deal less effective than had been anticipated. But the well-camouflaged Iraqi guns on the plateau did not appear to have suffered much damage, and their infantry, though they had 'sat in their trenches keeping their heads well down',<sup>3</sup> had not shown any signs of withdrawing and were now up to brigade strength. At 6.45 p.m. Smart signalled to R.A.F. H.Q. Middle East: 'Situation critical. . . . We still hope for the best.'

However, he went boldly on to the offensive next day and diverted a proportion of his effort against the Iraqi Air Force and the Army's line of communication. Rashid airfield and the Baghdad-Falluja road were bombed, in addition to renewed attacks on enemy guns and vehicles on the plateau.

<sup>1</sup> The news of Smart's intention was conveyed to Army H.Q. India by a very circuitous route. At 8.25 a.m. on May 2 a copy of a message from the Senior Naval Officer in the Persian Gulf, addressed to the C.-in-C. East Indies, briefly reporting Smart's decision, was distributed to the D.M.O., to Air H.Q., to the Viceroy's Private Secretary and to Mr. (later Sir Olaf) Caroe, the Foreign Secretary to the Government of India. This signal appears to have eluded the eyes of the official historian, who writes (*op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 183): 'A.V.M. Smart decided to attack at dawn on the following morning without issuing an ultimatum.'

<sup>2</sup> *Five Ventures* by Christopher Buckley, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



After forty-eight hours more of this aggressive defence—in the course of which Blenheims and Hurricanes newly arrived from the Middle East made low-level machine-gun attacks on the airfield at Mosul, where the Luftwaffe had established a small detachment—the Iraqis had had enough. The Axis support for which they asked had not been given, there was discouragement in Baghdad, and during the night of May 5-6, after a raid on their trenches by patrols of the K.O.R.R., the ground troops withdrew from the plateau at Habbaniya, leaving large quantities of badly needed arms and equipment. During the morning the R.A.F. armoured cars, the Levies and the K.O.R.R. went into action, with effective close support by aircraft of the Flying School, against the Iraqi forces on the Falluja road. The Iraqis fled, and twelve of their officers and three hundred other ranks were taken prisoner. In the afternoon a new column was observed moving up from Falluja; it was 'met with a low bombing and machine-gunning attack by forty aircraft. A welter of exploding ammunition and burning lorries was left behind and many more prisoners were taken. This was the end of the siege. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

On May 7 the Prime Minister sent another personal signal to Air Vice-Marshal Smart: 'Your vigorous and splendid action has largely restored the situation. We are all watching the grand fight you are making. All possible aid will be sent. Keep it up.'<sup>2</sup>

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During these crucial days the difference of opinion between G.H.Q. Middle East and G.H.Q. India about both the purpose and the conduct of the operations in Iraq became much more marked than hitherto. On May 2 Auchinleck gave General Quinan his directive, addressing him as 'General Officer Commanding British Empire troops in Iraq'. Quinan was instructed to assume this command from the time of his arrival in Basra, and he was told specifically: 'You will be under my orders.' Auchinleck sent a summary of the directive to London. On the following morning he had this signal from the Chiefs of Staff: 'In view of situation in Iraq which is not that which was visualized when India took responsibility it seems that operational command should now pass temporarily to Middle East whence alone immediate assistance can be given.'

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. II, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 230.

This will take place forthwith unless you see strong objections.'<sup>1</sup>

An hour and a half later Auchinleck, having consulted the Viceroy, replied: 'We concur with the temporary transfer of operational command but request higher operational control by Middle East so far as it affects situation at Basra may be exercised through this Headquarters. No objection however to direct communication Middle East to Basra.'

The motives underlying the sudden transfer of operational command from the General who had both the will and the forces (though not all the weapons and equipment) to exercise it effectively, who had foreseen the situation and reacted to it swiftly and effectively, to one who was most reluctant to assume it, whose forces on several other fronts were strained to the limit, and who was himself extremely tired, are and must remain a matter for speculation. It is possible that recollections of the Mesopotamian campaign of a quarter of a century before stirred a deep-seated distrust of India's capacity efficiently to control a major campaign outside her own borders. Whatever its origins, it was an unfortunate decision. It might have proved disastrous; as it was, it provoked an unnecessary degree of friction, misunderstanding and disagreement between two great Headquarters, and between one of them and those responsible for the higher strategic direction of the war.

Auchinleck's assessment of the situation, and his proposals for grappling with it, approximated much more closely to that of the Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet than did Wavell's. Yet they clung to Wavell and loaded him with a burden he did not want to bear.

This strange and sad disagreement was argued out in a long succession of telegrams, the most crucial of which were exchanged while the issue of the battle at Habbaniya was still in doubt. About midday (local time) on May 3, Auchinleck gave his appreciation of India's situation relative to the Middle East in a personal telegram to the C.I.G.S.:

If Alexandria and the Canal should be closed to us by enemy action, loss of Egypt would not be a major disaster, though importance of continuing to hold it cannot be minimized.

Even if we lose Egypt we should be able to hold Sudan and deny use of Red Sea to enemy.

<sup>1</sup> The order making the change effective reached Wavell on May 6. It was brought to him by Colonel Eric Dorman-Smith. He 'was very cross, having enough on his hands in any case', said Dorman-Smith. It was Wavell's birthday. He telegraphed Dill: 'What a baby you have given me on my 58th birthday.' *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 117.

To support Turkey and to stop enemy penetrating Asia, it is essential to deny to him Syria, Palestine and Iraq, and this may soon become our primary strategic object in this theatre.

Basra and Iraq are assuming major strategic importance as a base and line of communications area for operations in Middle East.

Development of Basra and communications leading thence north and north-west is urgent necessity.

Consolidation, by force if necessary, of our position in Iraq is urgent need.

At present India alone can produce troops for occupation of Iraq but these troops cannot perform task unless provided with modern weapons and aircraft which India cannot give them. Provision of these is exceedingly urgent.

This telegram coincided almost exactly with a signal from Wavell setting out his objections to the course of action which the Chiefs of Staff were determined that he should adopt.

I have consistently warned you that no assistance could be given to Iraq from Palestine in the present circumstances and have always advised that commitments in Iraq should be avoided. . . . My forces are stretched to the limit everywhere and I simply cannot afford to risk a split of forces on what cannot produce any effect. I do not see how I can possibly accept responsibility for the force at Basra of whose dispositions and strength I am unaware and consider that this must be controlled from India. I can only advise negotiations with Iraqis on the basis of liquidation of a regrettable incident by mutual arrangement, with the alternative of war with the British Empire, complete blockade and ruthless air action.

In a second long telegram later that same day Wavell expressed his willingness to make preparations and to do what he could to create the impression of a large force being prepared for action from Palestine, which might have some effect on the Iraqi Government. He then outlined the possible support which he could send from Palestine:

(a) One mechanized brigade, improvised from the Cavalry Division, incomplete in transport and weapons and not fully trained.

(b) One field regiment less one troop from Egypt, not available until May 9.

(c) One lorryborne infantry battalion, part of which was already at H.4 (a station on the pipeline from Iraq to Haifa).

(d) An improvised H.Q. and three mechanized squadrons of the Transjordan Frontier Force, whose political attitude was doubtful.

It would, Wavell calculated, take a week to get this force ready, and incidentally it would have no armoured cars or tanks, and very few A.A. or anti-tank weapons; his conclusion was that it would be 'both inadequate and too late'.

Returning to the idea of negotiation with Rashid Ali (which was persistently urged by his expert Arab advisers), Wavell suggested that the Turkish Government should be asked to mediate and American co-operation be obtained; and he pointed out that if, in any negotiations, the question of sending all the troops at Basra on to Palestine were raised, they would be 'better placed for action towards Habbaniya or Baghdad than at Basra'.

On May 4 the Chiefs of Staff answered this telegram in the firmest terms:

*Following from Chiefs of Staff, No. 88*

1. We much deplore extra burden thrown upon you at this critical time by events in Iraq. A commitment in Iraq was however inevitable. It was essential for us to establish a base at Basra and to put ourselves in a position of control over the port of Basra and to be ready to safeguard Iranian oil in case of need. The line of communication to Turkey through Iraq has also assumed greater importance due to air superiority in Aegean Sea. Additional reasons for attempting control over Iraq are (a) to be in a position if possible to continue use of Iraqi oil ourselves or at least to deny it to the enemy and (b) to establish reasons for aircraft reinforcement route to Middle East via Basra. Had we sent no forces to Basra the present situation at Habbaniya might still have arisen under Axis direction.

2. Control of operations in northern area must be in your hands as help can only come from Middle East. Air operations in all areas can only be co-ordinated by Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief and for the present disadvantages must be accepted, and control of land operations from Basra must also be the responsibility of C.-in-C. Middle East. This responsibility cannot be divided and orders will therefore be given by C.-in-C. Middle East direct to General, Basra, C.-in-C. in India being kept informed.

3. There can be no question of accepting Turkish offer of

mediation. For reasons in paragraph 1. above we can make no concessions. The security of Egypt remains paramount consideration, but subject to that proviso, it is essential that we should do all in our power (a) to restore situation at Habbaniya and (b) to place ourselves in a position to control pipeline to Mediterranean. . . .

During the same day Auchinleck, in a letter to the Viceroy's Private Secretary, outlined his proposals for reinforcing the troops now in Basra, not, it should be noted, with any idea of their being sent on to Palestine, but in order to occupy and control Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of strain almost too great to be borne was apparent in Wavell's next telegram, sent off on May 5:

Your 88 takes little account of realities. You must face facts.

I am arranging to assemble at H.4, near Transjordan-Iraq frontier, force consisting of following: mechanized cavalry brigade (incomplete), one field regiment (less one troop), fifteen R.A.F. armoured cars, three squadrons T.J.F.F., one Essex Regiment. It cannot be assembled before May 10 at earliest and could not reach Habbaniya till two days later even if no resistance met at Rutbah or elsewhere.

Very doubtful whether above force strong enough to relieve Habbaniya or whether Habbaniya can prolong resistance till its arrival. I am afraid I can only regard it as outside chance.

I feel it my duty to warn you in gravest possible terms that I consider prolongation of fighting in Iraq will seriously endanger defence of Palestine and Egypt. Political repercussions will be incalculable and may result in what I have spent nearly two years trying to avoid: serious internal trouble in our bases, apart from the weakening of strength by detachment such as above.

I therefore urge again most strongly that settlement should be negotiated as early as possible. . . .

Will do my best to control Basra situation, where fighting appears to have broken out, and am sending liaison officer to ascertain situation as soon as possible. I still feel that India, where reinforcement possibilities are known and whence force is maintained, is better placed to exercise effective control.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, pp. 227-8.

<sup>2</sup> Wavell took over command of the land operations in northern Iraq at noon on May 5. He sent his liaison officer to Basra on May 6. This officer returned to Cairo with his report on the situation, and Wavell assumed operational control of southern Iraq (including, of course, Basra) on May 9.

The impact of the receipt of these communications on the Prime Minister was considerable.<sup>1</sup> Early on the morning of May 6 he minuted to General Ismay:

The telegrams from Generals Wavell and Auchinleck should be considered forthwith, and a report made to me at the House of Commons before luncheon today.

The following points require attention:

(1) Why should the Force mentioned, which seems considerable, be deemed insufficient to deal with the Iraqi Army? What do you say about this? Fancy having kept the Cavalry Division in Palestine all this time without having the rudiments of a mobile column organized!

(2) Why should the troops at Habbaniya give in before May 12? Their losses have been nominal as so far reported. Their infantry made a successful sortie last night, and we are told that the bombardment stops whenever our aircraft appear. Great efforts should be made by the Air Force to aid and encourage Habbaniya. Surely some additional infantry can be flown there as reinforcements from Egypt? The most strenuous orders should be given to the officer commanding to hold out.

How can a settlement be negotiated, as General Wavell suggests? Suppose the Iraqis, under German instigation, insist upon our evacuating Basra, or moving in small detachments at their mercy across the country to Palestine. The opinion of the Senior Naval Officer at Basra is that a collapse or surrender there would be disastrous. This is also the opinion of the Government of India. I am deeply disturbed at General Wavell's attitude. He seems to have been taken as much by surprise on his eastern as he was on his western flank, and in spite of the enormous number of men at his disposal, and the great convoys reaching him, he seems to be hard up for battalions and companies. He gives me the impression of being tired out.

The proposals of the C.-in-C. in India for reinforcing Basra seem to deserve most favourable consideration.

Churchill drew certain important conclusions from what he believed to be the contrasting attitudes of the two Commanders-in-Chief. They were, however, the wrong conclusions. What was in fact an argument about strategy and tactics on the sheerly intellectual level, he interpreted as a qualitative difference in moral fibre and in temperament. This was a profound and painful mistake, which led

<sup>1</sup> 'I was not content with this.' Winston S. Churchill, *ibid.* p. 228.

the Prime Minister to underrate one commander and, for the time being, to be over-enthusiastic about the other. This emotional and irrational appraisal was to have far-reaching, rueful consequences. In the meantime, his praise for and thanks to Auchinleck were unstinted. The C.I.G.S. signalled to India: 'Your bold and generous offer greatly appreciated. Please prepare forces as a matter of urgency. Notify dates by which they will be ready to sail and we will confirm before despatch.'

And the pressure was renewed on the sorely tried Wavell. The Chiefs of Staff sent off this signal on May 6:

Your telegram of yesterday has been considered by Defence Committee. Settlement or negotiation cannot be entertained except on the basis of a complete climb down by Iraqis with safeguard against future Axis designs on Iraq.

Realities of the situation are that Rashid Ali has all along been hand in glove with Axis powers, and as we explained in our 88 was merely waiting until they could support him before exposing his hand. Our arrival at Basra forced him to go off at half cock before the Axis were ready. Thus there is an excellent chance of restoring the situation by bold action if it is not delayed.

Chiefs of Staff have therefore advised Defence Committee that they are prepared to accept responsibility for despatch of the force specified in paragraph (2) of your telegram at the earliest possible moment. They would like to see some light tanks and Bofors added if possible but there should be no delay on this account. Telegraph command arrangements.

Defence Committee direct that A.O.C. Iraq should be informed that he will be given assistance and in the meanwhile it is his duty to defend Habbaniya to the last.

Subject to security of Egypt being maintained maximum air support possible should be given to operations in Iraq.

Wavell, while loyally carrying out the extremely explicit orders which he had been given, overruling his own advice, continued to point out—as it was his right and duty to do—the risks and difficulties which he believed to be inherent in the course of action prescribed.<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, though he had no direct control over the operations, watched with growing concern as the argument unfolded. On May 9 he sent a carefully reasoned and weighty personal message to Dill:

<sup>1</sup> The telegrams exchanged are set out at some length by Winston S. Churchill, *ibid.* pp. 230-2.

Although control of forces in Iraq now rests with Mideast it is impossible for India to disassociate herself from the formulation of policy in that area. Not only is success or failure in Iraq vital to the safety of India but most of the forces and material employed in that theatre must come from India. I gather also that it is intended that control of operations will eventually revert to India.

We are prepared to make great efforts and to take great risks to support a sound policy which in our opinion has some prospect of success and also will continue as in the past to give all help possible to Mideast. The opportunity for controlling the situation in Iraq by means of a force stationed in northern Palestine is however past and the main advantage of that proposal is now nullified by the fact that we are firmly established at Basra. In our opinion there is now only one policy which will call a definite halt to German penetration into Iraq, Iran and possibly Turkey and Syria. As you are aware German influence is already firmly established in Iran and failing some positive action on our part will no doubt greatly influence the situation both in Iraq and elsewhere.

This policy is to establish ourselves with the minimum delay in sufficient force at Baghdad and other key points such as Mosul and Kirkuk so as to be able to resist any attack internal or external by the Axis. These forces must have a secure L. of C. and this must in our opinion lead from Basra. Except as very temporary alternative the Baghdad-Haifa L. of C. is too difficult and too vulnerable to Axis forces based in Syria.

The present time when Iraq forces have suffered a serious setback, are short of ammunition and indecisive of purpose is ideal for obtaining our objective with the minimum effort and if we act boldly and employ suitable personnel and suitable methods we may do it with the support rather than the opposition of the tribes.

The forces we can make available were shown in our signal of May 5 and it is only lack of equipment that prevents them from being augmented. Provided no time is lost there is in our opinion a very good prospect that they will be sufficient to ensure success. If they are not we should at any rate be in a better position to re-establish our position than if we restrict ourselves to a passive defensive attitude at Basra.

The Viceroy was in complete accord with the Commander-in-Chief. He sent off on the following day a personal telegram to Amery which included this sentence: 'I may say that we think that



an immediate and bold movement of troops from Basra might well prove highly successful and we have today been reinforced in this view by the copious harvest of prisoners and armaments garnered at Habbaniya by a handful of infantry after air action.'

The argument entered a new phase as the fundamental political and strategic cleavage between Wavell on the one hand and Linlithgow and Auchinleck on the other became more obvious. Wavell defined his own position on May 10 in a telegram of great lucidity and force:

There is obviously some divergence of view between C.-in-C. in India and myself on Iraqi policy. As we are both vitally interested consider it desirable to state my opinion clearly and it must then be for War Cabinet to decide policy. At this critical period essential that our limited resources be concentrated on our really vital military interests. In Iraq these are from my point of view as follows:

- (a) Avoidance of major conflict with Arabs.
- (b) Security of oil supplies from Abadan.
- (c) Security of oil supplies from Iraq.
- (d) Maintenance of air route to India.

All these are of minor importance compared with the security of Egypt and Palestine.

India naturally does not appreciate fully effect on military position in Middle East which large-scale Arab uprising against us in Iraq would have. It would have repercussions in Palestine, Aden, Yemen, Egypt and Syria which might absorb very large proportion of my Force in maintaining internal order. Firmness in dealing with enemy attack on Habbaniya will have on whole good effect but unless we can get back to normal relations with well-disposed Iraqi Government at very early date suggestions that we propose to occupy country and suppress Iraqi independence will be exploited by enemy with serious results. Already loyalty of Transjordan Frontier Force is in grave doubt. Hence my anxiety for political solution as early as possible. I do not think strength of Arab national feeling is realized by India as it is here.

Supply of oil from Iraq to Haifa can only be obtained by Iraqi goodwill. Iraqis are at present in position to destroy refineries and cut off supply and to imagine that we could by military occupation secure this long and vulnerable supply is to my mind illusory.

Security of Abadan oil depends largely on having force available at Basra to protect refinery and to keep open Shatt-el-Arab.

Anti-aircraft defence will be required and will be difficult to provide.

Maintenance of air route to India can be secured if Habbaniya and Basra remain in our hands.

On above premises my view is that occupation of Mosul and Kirkuk are unnecessary and are certainly not within our resources for some time. Do not consider possibility of Axis forces advancing on these places need be seriously considered at present especially in view present relations between Germany and Russia. Should Germans secure passage through Turkey they would be much more likely to advance through Syria direct on Palestine and Egypt.

As regards Baghdad do not consider occupation desirable except temporarily to secure favourable Government or at request Iraqi Government. Consider Baghdad can more easily be occupied from northern Palestine than from Basra. Line of communication from latter is most difficult and vulnerable if tribes hostile. It will probably be easier to keep open desert route for small force at all events which can base itself on Habbaniya on arrival there. Effect on hostile elements of action from this direction instead of the Axis assistance they expect may also be considerable.

Policy which I recommend therefore for immediate repeat immediate situation is:

(a) To do everything to secure political settlement . . . as soon as possible and to resume normal relations with Iraqi Government,

(b) Force at Basra to secure and organize base and endeavour to establish good relations with tribes but not to move forward till strong enough to be effective which I do not feel will be for some little time.

(c) 'Habforce' will move from Palestine to Habbaniya and thence if situation permits on Baghdad with view to influencing political situation.

Further policy and number of troops required can be considered in light of events. From recent discussions with Nuri and Regent it is quite obvious that they expect if friendly Government secured we shall not maintain more troops in Iraq than necessary to our lines of communication.

Am flying to Palestine tomorrow to discuss action of 'Habforce' and question of T.J.F.F. Propose visit Basra as soon as possible and if situation in Middle East permits to fly on to India for discussion of problem with C.-in-C., unless C.-in-C. would prefer to meet me Basra.

This telegram of Wavell's was received in India on the following day, and Auchinleck commented on it and on the whole long argument in a brief letter to the Viceroy:

As you know I am most uneasy about the situation in Iraq in particular and about the views of G.H.Q., Middle East, on the strategic situation in Western Asia generally. The telegrams we have received today have not allayed my anxiety.

As I see it, Midcast are looking at the Asiatic strategic situation from a parochial angle and visualize North Africa and the Levant as one fortress, India as another and Malaya-Burma-Hong Kong as a third.

I would prefer to look at this situation as being one continuous and united front divided into three sectors, each interlocking with and interdependent on the other. The right sector is the Far East Command, the centre sector the India Command and the left sector the Midcast Command.

I feel that until all concerned are prepared to accept this view and work to it to a common end, we shall waste much of our effort in voicing our divergent views one against the other.

I had considered cabling General Dill on these lines, but I feel I have done a lot of cabling lately and I wondered whether Your Excellency thinks it worth while trying to press this point of view any further at the moment.

The Viceroy thought that it would be as well to continue to press India's views, if for no other reason than that a considerable number of Indian troops were now committed in Iraq, and their control would in the near future revert to India. Auchinleck therefore reiterated all the arguments in favour of prompt, resolute military action and no negotiation with Rashid Ali.

Wavell's comment on this was on lines which had by now become extremely familiar; but his reluctance to carry the operation through to what Auchinleck believed to be the logical conclusion was no longer based on sheerly military considerations. Political factors had become even more important to him. What India wanted, he told the Chiefs of Staff, was 'obviously military occupation'; 'without exception all in Middle East with experience Arab affairs' were against such a policy and in favour of endeavouring to instal a friendly Government in Iraq.

Politically, Wavell's opinion concurred with that held by the Ambassador in Baghdad (although he was now besieged in his Embassy and virtually *incommunicado*, since Iraqi troops had entered

the compound and removed his wireless transmitter), by the many Arab experts in and around the Embassy in Cairo, and by the Foreign Office. It was that which found favour with the Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet. It became the main theme of the rest of the telegrams which were exchanged. When the two Commanders-in-Chief had agreed to meet in Basra, Churchill signalled to Auchinleck:

I am very glad you are going to meet Wavell at Basra. He will tell you about 'Tiger' and 'Scorcher'.<sup>1</sup> A victory in Libya would alter all values in Iraq both in German and Iraqi minds.

We are most grateful to you for the energetic efforts you have made about Basra. The stronger the forces India can assemble there the better. But we have not yet felt able to commit ourselves to any advance (except with small parties when the going is good) northward towards Baghdad and still less to occupation in force of Kirkuk and/or Mosul. This cannot be contemplated until we see what happens about 'Tiger' and 'Scorcher'. We are therefore confined at the moment to trying to get a friendly Government installed in Baghdad and building up the largest possible bridgehead at Basra. Even less can we attempt to dominate Syria at the present time though the Free French may be allowed to do their best there. The defeat of the Germans in Libya is the commanding event and larger and longer views cannot be taken till that is achieved, and everything will be much easier then.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile the situation in Iraq grew uglier. It was known that German aircraft, using Aleppo in Vichy-controlled Syria as a staging post, were now operating in Iraq. They made more than one attack on the scratch force which had begun to move across the desert from Transjordan towards Habbaniya. On May 13 an imposing advance party of the Luftwaffe, headed by Major Axel von Blomberg, the son of the German Field-Marshal, flew to Baghdad. Rashid Ali, his ministers and a number of other notables waited on the airfield to welcome the Major. As his Heinkel came in to land some Iraqi police levies, who had been posted as airfield

<sup>1</sup> 'Tiger' was the code-name for the passage of a fast convoy of ships, carrying over 300 tanks, through the Mediterranean to Alexandria instead of round the Cape; Churchill—and Wavell—attached great importance to this operation. 'Scorcher' was the code-name for the defence of Crete. (See Winston S. Churchill, *ibid.* p. 232.)

defence troops but whom nobody had bothered to brief, opened fire on it. One chance shot killed von Blomberg. It is not easy to estimate the effect which this accident had on the policy of Axis intervention in Iraq; but there are grounds for concluding that it was considerable. On the day that it happened Lord Linlithgow, in a private letter to Mr. Amery, analysed with subtlety and skill the differing opinions in the 'military occupation' versus 'friendly Government' controversy:

I fear we have bothered you a good deal with telegrams about the Iraqi position: but it has fairly definitely emerged that there is a conflict of view between Middle East and ourselves—a conflict of view perhaps not wholly unnatural, given the different geographical as well as political angles from which we view the situation. I think (as always tends to happen in this sort of correspondence) that Middle East have read a good deal more into our telegrams than we had intended or than was really justified. But if Auchinleck and Wavell can get together (for I think the two men know one another well and like one another) it may be possible to iron out any misunderstandings that there may be.

The last thing, I need not say, that we in India want is a military occupation of the whole of Iraq. What is however essential is that we should have our lines of communication, and that of course involves, in the conditions of that somewhat lightly organized State, effective arrangements to ensure that those lines of communication are properly held and not cut. Moreover, as I said in one of my telegrams to you, one cannot prudently overlook the grave risk which one runs, given the great skill of the Germans in this matter of infiltration and their capacity for organizing fifth column activities in a manner so astonishingly successful in the case of highly organized European States, in taking the Iraqis at their word and accepting their competence to safeguard their own position.

I am quite sure that if we are to avoid infiltration on a scale that may be very dangerous indeed to us, given the vital importance of this area and of the head of the Persian Gulf, we must be pretty strongly represented on the spot. Even if we can get rid of Rashid Ali and get the Regent back with a Cabinet sufficiently responsive to our control, we shall have to buttress them against German intrigue, and to do that effectively we must be on the spot in sufficient strength. If we are not in that position, we shall be asking for a repetition of the events that led to the overthrow of

the Regent, with the added danger that this time the Germans will be ready.

I am not at all happy at the thought of the dangers which may confront us if we miss the present opportunity, and I do feel on that side, with every admiration for Wavell, that he is (perhaps not unnaturally) disposed to under-estimate the critical significance of the Iraqi area. I cannot altogether resist the feeling that Wavell is using his Intelligence machine as a political department—never a good thing to do. I am not sure whether Clayton is the same man who was head of the Intelligence in Cairo during the last war. Such views as I am able to obtain about present incumbent suggest that he is a defeatist. But you must not attach authority to this opinion.

On May 15 General Wavell sent his C.G.S., General Sir Arthur Smith, to Basra. General Smith found that all was quiet there, and that normal life had been resumed by the population. General Quinan, who had now assumed command of the Indian contingent, took the view, as he made clear to General Smith, that his first task was to secure Basra as a base and that any premature move northwards would be dangerous. He could not, he pointed out, in any case contemplate such a move for at least three months on account of floods. This opinion was by no means in accord with that held by Army H.Q. in India, but it supported and gave strength to the other school of thought which was prevalent in Cairo. It is not without significance that there was never any clear-cut definition of policy given by the War Cabinet; the argument was allowed to drift on inconclusively, with the War Cabinet in general approving the ends which Auchinleck desired, but hoping that they could be procured by Wavell's methods and under Wavell's authority. They attached great importance to the conference between the two Commanders-in-Chief. This was held at Basra on the morning of May 24. Wavell could only spare a few hours, and then had to fly back to Cairo. It was a friendly and fruitful meeting.

Wavell put the gist of it in a telegram to the C.I.G.S. on the following day:

From discussion with Auchinleck it is obvious that we regard Iraq from somewhat different angles. My main task, defence of Egypt and Palestine, would be made more difficult but would not be greatly jeopardized by hostile control of Iraq, whereas hostile control of Syria would affect me much more closely and dangerously. So long as my resources are inadequate I am bound

to be influenced by the closer and more threatening danger. India on the other hand regard Iraq as absolutely vital outpost of their defence. They consider that hostile Iraq would mean hostile Iran and Afghanistan and compromise whole defence of Indian Empire. From point of view of greater interest it seems therefore desirable that India should control operations in Iraq.

Middle East is already fully occupied with Western Desert campaign, defence of Crete, danger to Syria and Cyprus, besides East African campaign.

Troops in Iraq are mainly Indian. Maintenance must be from India and administration can more easily be done from India.

In theory there is advantage in allotment of equipment being controlled by Mideast but at present there is difficulty and waste of time since Mideast itself is so short of equipment and there is no means of sending equipment to Indian troops in Iraq except by sea from Suez to Basra, possibly via India.

From political point of view it is better that all Arab affairs should be under one control which can only be Mideast. Also if Iraq becomes line of communication to Turkey there are advantages in Mideast which must be closely concerned with Turkish operations exercising control. By good liaison, however, both above difficulties could probably be overcome if India took over Iraq.

To sum up, it seems that in view of her greater interest and greater stake in Iraqi operations India should resume control as soon as possible. This seems to be when force at Basra is in position to control and maintain operations from Habbaniya against Baghdad and this can presumably only be when communications can be re-established between Basra and Habbaniya.

The text of this signal had been agreed between the two Generals before they parted. Auchinleck left Basra for Karachi on the following day; after a couple of days in Karachi he went back to his headquarters. On the way he drafted a long, frank and valuable letter to the C.I.G.S., amplifying and explaining the telegram which Wavell had sent:

I am writing this in the aeroplane on my way back from Basra, where Wavell and I had a morning together before he had to fly back to Cairo.

I am very glad we were able to meet as I know now what I always thought was the case, namely, that Mideast have never really had time to think of Iraq in its relation to India and the maintenance of our position in Southern Asia generally, but have

so far looked at it only as a nuisance area on their eastern flank. In other words, they quite naturally have considered it solely from the point of view of the defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal. . . .

I think that, as a result of our talk, Wavell sees our point of view and agrees that we must take bold action in Iraq if we are ever to regain our position there, and he has given orders to Quinan accordingly. We must take and keep Baghdad if we are to have any hope of stopping German infiltration, and, having got it, we must, in my opinion, then secure the key points in the north such as Mosul, Kirkuk, Erbil. That this can be done by bluff and boldness I have little doubt, if we act now. We must run big risks to gain our objects, one of which is, I presume, the keeping open of a line of supply to Turkey. . . .

After I had seen Wavell, I saw Jamal Madfai, one of the most prominent of the supporters of the Regent and an ex-Prime Minister.

He was forthcoming and was firm on the point that if a friendly Government under the auspices of the Regent were to survive, it would require the physical support of our forces to hold the important towns and areas. He seemed to think that they could remake the Iraqi Army but that it would not be able to do more than hold outlying points, even if we had supporting forces within reach. I impressed on him that nothing was farther from our thoughts than the permanent occupation of the country and we parted on very good terms, I think.

Wavell and I discussed the question of control with the result given in his telegram to you. I did not think it was any use trying to take over until touch had been established between Quinan and 'Habforce', as, until this happens, Quinan cannot really influence the situation round Baghdad, except by sending reinforcements to Habbaniya by air, which he is now doing. It is a slow process, however, owing to the scarcity of troop-carrying aircraft. We have sent all we have got from India. I admit that I was greatly tempted to take over then and there and, between ourselves, I feel that Wavell would be glad to be rid of this additional commitment.

I feel, however, that as soon as we get Baghdad, the reopening of road and rail communications between that place and Basra is likely to follow quickly and that then I can take over with some hope of being able to do something.

Wavell, I think, agrees with me here. In fact we agreed everywhere once we had realized each other's point of view.

I think that Quinan now understands the situation and that he



will get on with the job, which is one which calls for unorthodox and opportunist methods.

As I see it, there can be no idea at present of an organized campaign and normal methods of maintenance.

The Iraqi Force is still in urgent need of anti-aircraft artillery. I have sent four of our eight three-inch A.A. guns from India and can do no more as I must keep some guns to train our new A.A. units against the time when we get the equipments you have promised us. Wavell says he may be able to send one or two heavy batteries and perhaps some Bofors, but I know how hard-pressed he is and he may find himself unable to do this. I hope he will as the thought of the Force and the shipping in that narrow river practically without A.A. protection against enemy bombing attacks worries me continually. I hope you will do all you can to help us from any source whatever. Anti-tank artillery will become an urgent need later; we have a battery of anti-tank eighteen-pdrs there, but they are not really much good.

The prime need of all is some form of support in the air and here it seems that A.O.C.-in-C. Middle East cannot help us. I feel that, in the circumstances, Quinan must have an air component at his disposal, however repugnant this may be to Air Force ideas of fluidity and mobility. We feel here in India that we cannot afford for our own sakes to leave this force, predominantly Indian as it is, without at least some support in the air. It is for this reason that I have pressed and am pressing so hard for the return of our two Blenheim squadrons from Malaya. They do belong to India and were only lent to the Far East Command at your urgent call until such time as reinforcements could be sent from elsewhere. I understand these reinforcements have now arrived. As you know, we have bled ourselves white in the matter of aircraft to help to strengthen danger spots, and now I feel that, on such meagre information as we have at our disposal about the Japanese situation, the Iraqi demand is more urgent than the Malayan, for the moment.

Our arrangements for the reinforcement of Iraq are proceeding smoothly on the lines approved by you, and full use is being made of the available shipping. There is some congestion in the port of Basra but we are doing our best to send extra labour units to relieve it. The sheds are full of all sorts of goods awaiting transit to Turkey. Rolling-stock too is short, but I am seeing what we can do about it. . . .

On May 30 the Chiefs of Staff signalled their approval of the

decisions reached by the two Commanders-in-Chief. Meanwhile, the end came suddenly and speedily in Iraq itself. 'Habforce' having crossed the desert at a good pace and having encountered very little opposition, reached Habbaniya on May 18. Falluja was attacked and taken on the following day by 'Habforce's' advance guard, reinforced by the K.O.O.R. and a Gurkha battalion flown up from Shaiba. Some days passed in which preparations were made for the assault on Baghdad; and during this pause the R.A.F. attacked and destroyed the remnants of the Luftwaffe which had been operating from Mosul and other airfields in northern Iraq. Quinan, complying with the instructions issued to him after the Commanders-in-Chief had had their meeting, moved northwards up the river towards Baghdad. His force's difficulties—floods, lack of river craft, road transport and railway rolling-stock—differed little from those encountered by another Indian Expeditionary Force twenty-five years before. On this same bare, muddy plain the fathers and uncles of many of the men under Quinan's command, and their British officers and comrades-in-arms, had fought, endured and died; but the advance which took years in the First World War was a matter of days in the second.

Rashid Ali's nerve, never conspicuously strong, collapsed. Even the Axis money—a milliard lire of which (under the terms of the secret treaty) would have gone straight into his own pocket—had turned out to be fairy gold, and he had been denied the Axis military advice and aid on which he relied. On the night of May 29–30 a party of fugitives passed over the frontier into Persia; Sir Reader Bullard, His Majesty's Ambassador in Teheran, notified the Foreign Office and the Government of India of their arrival. They included Rashid Ali, thirty of his closest associates, the German and Italian Ministers and the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem. The Mayor of Baghdad took over the administration and sued for an immediate armistice. At six o'clock on the morning of May 31 an Iraqi deputation bearing a flag of truce was met in the outskirts of the city by Major-General J. G. W. Clark (the commander of 'Habforce'), Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac (who had taken over from Smart, who had been badly injured in a car accident), and Major (later General Sir John) Glubb, the commander of the Arab Legion, a detachment of which had joined 'Habforce'. A car was sent to fetch Sir Kinahan Cornwallis: the siege of the Embassy was lifted. An armistice was signed at three o'clock that afternoon. The Regent returned. A new Government took office under Jamal Madfai. The episode was over.

It was more than a timely victory in a period of grave difficulty. Its importance can only be justly assessed if what would have happened had the venture failed is clearly envisaged. It was, as Churchill said quite rightly, 'a race with our meagre forces against time'.<sup>1</sup> The Official History sums it up a little light-heartedly by observing that 'it was a case of all's well that ends well'.<sup>2</sup> If it had not ended thus, the Axis would have had control of the main source of British and Commonwealth oil; Egypt and Palestine, whose defence Wavell so doggedly maintained as his first priority, would have been outflanked. 'Hitler's hand might have reached out very far towards India and beckoned to Japan,' says Churchill, and adds: 'Hitler certainly cast away the opportunity of taking a great prize for little cost in the Middle East. We in Britain, although pressed to the extreme, managed with scanty forces to save ourselves from far-reaching or lasting injury.'

This is not giving credit where credit is due. The inability of the Germans to exploit the chances that opened up before them in April and May 1941, the incompetence and muddle-headedness of Rashid Ali and the Golden Square, and the decision of the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff to overrule the judgment of the 'overstrained but gallantly struggling'<sup>3</sup> Wavell were all factors which contributed to the successful outcome of what was undoubtedly a risky enterprise.

The prime factor, however, was the attitude and the actions of the Viceroy of India and his Commander-in-Chief. The conduct of the war at this time was a matter of choosing between a multiplicity of risks, all of great gravity. Linlithgow and Auchinleck made a better and more accurate assessment of the particular hazards involved in Iraq; to the limit of their capacity—indeed, in some respects, such as the provision of A.A. guns, beyond it—they acted upon that assessment. The War Cabinet's decision to give Wavell operational control of the enterprise was inscrutable; if they had not harassed him and, in the end, overruled him, it might have proved calamitous. Linlithgow and Auchinleck persevered tenaciously, encouraged and ably supported by Amery, until their arguments—at any rate on the military aspects of the affair—were accepted by the War Cabinet. It was not without irony that the real lessons which the Iraqi episode ought to have driven home, which were lessons in high policy and strategy, were not learned, and that the wrong conclusions, which merely affected personalities, were drawn.

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

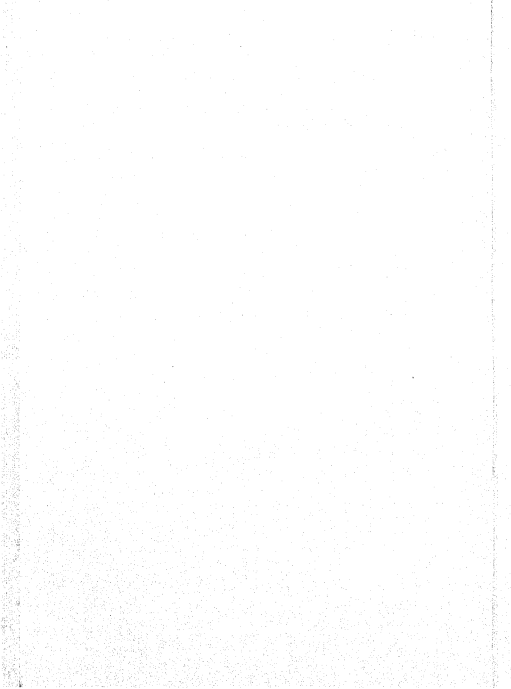
<sup>2</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. II, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 236.

Churchill wrote in after years: 'Although no one was more pleased and relieved than Wavell himself, the episode could not pass without leaving impressions in his mind and ours. At the same time General Auchinleck's forthcoming attitude in sending, at our desire, and with the Viceroy's cordial assent, the Indian division to Basra so promptly and the readiness with which Indian reinforcements were supplied, gave us the feeling of a fresh mind and a hitherto untaxed personal energy.'<sup>1</sup>

These impressions were accurate within a limited emotional or intuitive range. Their effects, on every plane of the man's conduct, were of the utmost importance.

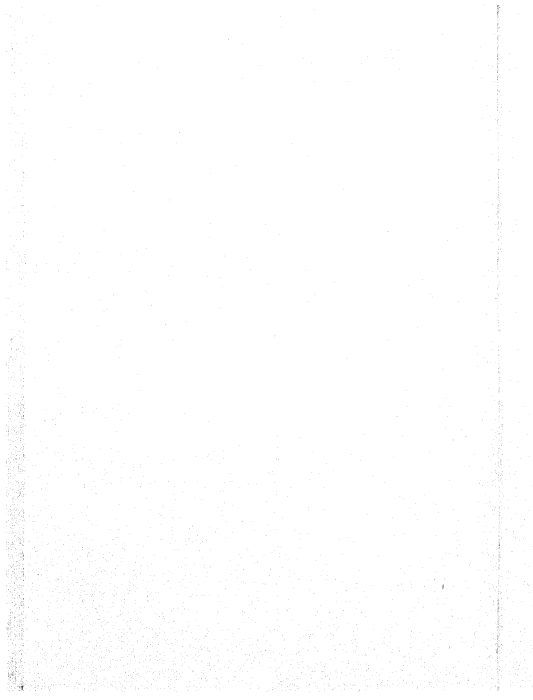
<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 237.



## BOOK III

I maintain that in war you must either trust your general or sack him.

FIELD-MARSHAL SIR JOHN DILL



## CHAPTER TEN

### 'Your Great Command'

ON 21 May 1941, when all was still gravely in doubt in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern theatre of war, and three days before Wavell and Auchinleck met at Basra, the C.I.G.S. wrote in his own hand a private letter to the Commander-in-Chief in India. He realized that there was no chance of its reaching Auchinleck before this meeting, but he was under a strong compulsion to set down, to a friend whom he trusted implicitly, his thoughts and feelings at this most difficult time. Dill was chivalrous, sensitive and far-seeing; he was also, in his private life, a man of deep and durable affections.

I very much agree [Dill wrote] with all that you have said by letter and by telegram about the problem of the Middle East—your Middle East, the real Middle East. If we cannot quickly scotch the trouble that has started with Rashid Ali it is difficult to see where it will all end. The Arab world as such does not worry me but the Muslim world as a whole does—very much. When can we get Iraq and all that back to you? Perhaps you will be able to tell me after you have had a talk with Wavell.

*For your eye alone:* I would like to tell you that the P.M. has lost confidence in Wavell—if he ever had any.<sup>1</sup> I maintain that in war you must either trust your general or sack him. That being so we *may* be faced with the withdrawal of Wavell from the Middle East—even before you get this letter. If that happens you must succeed him—there is no one else who could do the job better and no one who would have everyone's confidence so thoroughly. All this may never happen—or it may have happened already. Will write again soon. Bless you.

This letter did not reach Auchinleck until after the momentous

<sup>1</sup> Dill was aware of Churchill's ebbing confidence more than a fortnight earlier, and of his wish to replace him by Auchinleck. (*The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 116.)



events foreshadowed in its last paragraph had occurred. There is no trace of any reply to it. For a month more the tide of battle ebbed and flowed in the Middle East. The Germans consolidated their hold on the Balkans, then they reached out and, in a savage and difficult campaign, captured Crete. Wavell was fighting on five fronts; and a long series of telegrams from the Prime Minister urging, in characteristic terms, that he should open an immediate offensive on at least two of them did not serve to ease the burden which this steadfast and sagacious man was carrying. The effect of these telegrams has been described, with restraint but with poignant sincerity, by the official historian.<sup>1</sup> The impact of similar communications on General Auchinleck is a major element in the next part of this narrative.

Wavell was undoubtedly tired during these last weeks of his command in this theatre; he knew it himself, others commented on it. But his calm fortitude remained unshaken. Early in June he launched, against Vichy-held Syria, one of the offensives for which the Prime Minister had pressed. All did not go well with this campaign at the beginning. That it was an essential operation there can be no doubt; but it added to the complex strain under which Wavell was labouring. In the middle of the same month—again in obedience to the Prime Minister's imperious behests—he attacked in the Western Desert. This operation, which bore the code-name 'Battleaxe', was a failure. The Western Desert Force lost in three days' fighting 122 officers and men killed, 588 wounded and 259 missing; four guns were lost, and of the ninety cruisers and roughly one hundred 'I' tanks which began the battle, twenty-seven cruisers and sixty-four 'I' tanks were lost through enemy action or breakdown. The Royal Air Force lost thirty-three fighters and three bombers. The Axis casualties were by no means as severe, and when the battle ended the British forward troops were back on the line from which they had sallied out, the enemy had retaken his former positions on the Egyptian-Libyan border, and Tobruk, with the 9th Australian Division holding it, was under siege.

The disaster of Crete, the tardiness with which the Syrian entanglement was being cleaned up, and the failure of 'Battleaxe' all combined to seal Wavell's fate. The advice which Dill, the C.I.G.S., gave to the Prime Minister was consistent throughout—'You must back him or sack him'—and, according to General Kennedy, this infuriated him.<sup>2</sup> This period of the war was almost as unhappy and

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. II, p. 245.

<sup>2</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 118.

as full of stress for Dill as it was for Wavell. On the afternoon of May 19 Churchill told Dill that he had finally decided to order Wavell and Auchinleck to exchange posts. Dill had already made it clear that he thought it better for Wavell to come home, since it was certain that he would be brought back again into the forefront of the war. Churchill did not want Wavell ‘hanging around in London, living in a room in his club’, but in India where, so he believed, the General ‘would enjoy sitting under the pagoda tree’.

Not only Dill but Amery opposed the transfer. Amery thought that ‘everybody would feel that India was being saddled with a cast-off, whether for reasons of failure or mere fatigue’. Dill, however, carried his opposition a point further. He argued that ‘Auchinleck, for all his great qualities and his outstanding record on the Frontier, was not the coming man of the war, as the Prime Minister thought’.<sup>1</sup>

The prescience as well as the historical importance of this opinion deserves the closest attention. It was given two days before the letter to Auchinleck was written which is quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Many tragic consequences could have been averted had it been followed. The unique authority with which it was given must be emphasized. If Dill had a ‘favourite disciple’ it was Auchinleck; Dill had watched closely over, and had done his best to advance, Auchinleck’s career for some fifteen years past. His personal affection for him was deep and unwavering; but he knew his man—better perhaps than at that time Auchinleck knew himself, better by far than the Prime Minister knew, or was ever to know him. Yet when he sat down, forty-eight hours later, to write to Auchinleck, Dill was aware that his warning would go unheeded. How heavy was his heart at that moment?

However, the decision was postponed for another month—not a happy month, in general, for British fortunes in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. On June 21 General Kennedy returned to the War Office from a week’s leave; he has recorded that Dill said, when they met, ‘I suppose you realize we shall lose the Middle East?’<sup>2</sup>

June 21 was Auchinleck’s fifty-fifth birthday. Late that afternoon the Prime Minister sent over to the War Office copies of two

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 119–20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 133. This despondency was not shared in the Middle East itself. On the morning of June 22, a few hours after the German declaration of war on Russia, Gen. Wavell had his customary pre-breakfast swim at the Gezira Sporting Club. A junior and youthful staff officer, who was taking the same kind of exercise at the same time, recalls the C.-in-C. as he appeared that morning: calm, relaxed, genial and—for him—more than ordinarily talkative.



telegrams which he had sent to General Wavell and to the Viceroy of India, ordering the exchange of posts between the two Commanders-in-Chief. There had been a brief preliminary exchange between Churchill and Linlithgow; the Viceroy conceded that 'on the P.M.'s judgment of the necessities of the situation, he must express his readiness to make any sacrifice'. A second telegram to the Viceroy was delivered at Viceregal Lodge in Simla in the small hours of June 22,<sup>1</sup> to coincide with that addressed to Wavell. It read:

Thank you so much for your telegram. Will you kindly pass following to General Auchinleck. I have already telegraphed to General Wavell.

After very careful consideration of all circumstances I have decided to submit your name to King for command of His Majesty's armies in the Middle East. You should proceed forthwith to Cairo and relieve General Wavell. General Wavell will succeed you as Commander-in-Chief in India. You should confer with him upon whole situation and should also concert with him the measures you will take in common to arrest eastward movement of German armies which is clearly impending. Pray let me know when you will arrive. The change is to be kept absolutely secret until you are installed in your new post.

Sir Gilbert Laithwaite sent a copy of this telegram immediately to the Commander-in-Chief with an explanatory note attached:

... H.E. authorized me in the event of the P.M. telegraphing over the week-end (since he is himself out at Dharni) at once to pass any message to you direct, and to let you know that with however great uneasiness, and regret on any ground, he had felt that there could be only one answer to the Prime Minister's appeal.

If you would like to speak, I shall be in my house or in office till about 9.40. I am anxious to be away from 9.40 till about 11.15, but will be back by about 11.15.

Auchinleck expressed in forthright and forcible terms his feelings about the telegram. It was, however, an order. The self-discipline of a lifetime asserted itself. Churchill has said that Wavell 'received the decision with poise and dignity'.<sup>2</sup> Auchinleck swiftly mastered his feelings and obeyed the order without demur.

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Sir Gilbert Laithwaite to Gen. Auchinleck, 22.6.41.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 310.

He replied:

Thank you for your confidence in me which I shall do my best to justify. Hope to leave Simla by first available plane Friday 27th and arrive Cairo by air 30th. As directed by you will confer fully with General Wavell. Am maintaining strictest secrecy.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

22 June 1941

I welcome you as C.-in-C. Middle East. No British Commander has been asked to assume greater responsibilities. You can, as you know, count on my whole-hearted support and you have my full confidence.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

22 June 1941

Very many thanks for welcome and assurance of support which I know will always be forthcoming.

*Secretary of State for India to Viceroy*

25 June 1941

Losing Auchinleck is a great blow but you were clearly right in appreciating without demur or qualification in view of supreme issues at stake. I have however strongly urged Prime Minister to make the change-over an avowedly temporary one (a) in Auchinleck's own interest to enable him to complete his appointment; (b) in India's interest for the organization of defence at the end of the war; (c) because German advance through Transcaucasia into Iran may before many months are out make Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan the main theatre.

Meanwhile please convey following message from me to Auchinleck: Warmest congratulations on great opportunity. I know you will fully justify Prime Minister's confidence. Deeply as I regret your loss for India at this creative moment I look forward to you coming back with even greater authority and experience to complete work you have so well begun.

*Viceroy to Secretary of State for India*

25 June 1941

Auchinleck is very anxious that announcement of change-over should be simultaneous in India and England, and I entirely agree and feel sure that you and Prime Minister will also agree. If we can have advance information of date and terms it will much help us in securing a good press for Wavell.

\* \* \*

The decision once made was irrevocable. It would be foolish to

claim, in view of all that was to follow, that it was the right decision. The choice and the responsibility were the Prime Minister's. It is the measure both of Churchill's unique and unquestioned authority at this time and of his supreme self-confidence that he was able to argue with transparent sincerity: 'I found that these views of mine encountered no resistance in our Ministerial and military circles in London.'<sup>1</sup> Dill had had his misgivings and had expressed them. The Viceroy and the Secretary of State for India had had no hesitation in formulating their unwillingness to lose Auchinleck and be given Wavell in exchange. Auchinleck himself—though the Prime Minister, of course, had no means of knowing this—was in two minds.

The seriousness of the mistake was to become apparent later, on the planes of global policy and strategy as much as on the personal plane. Meanwhile the Prime Minister, who, as he justly claimed, 'never wielded autocratic powers, and always had to move with and focus political and professional opinion',<sup>2</sup> had matters all his own way.

\* \* \*

The professional careers and reputations of Archibald Wavell and Claude Auchinleck were for the next five years to be interwoven in a strangely subtle and complicated pattern. They were not unknown to each other. They liked and trusted each other. But until their meeting at Basra in May 1941, although their difference in age was only three years, their relationship had been that of a respected senior (Wavell) on one side, and an aspiring and respectful junior (Auchinleck) on the other. At the Basra meeting and afterwards Auchinleck knew himself to be dealing with Wavell on level terms. From June 1941 onwards Providence, of which the Prime Minister was the instrument, ordained that they should bear, sometimes separately and sometimes together, as heavy—and in many respects as tragic—a yoke as has ever been laid on two brave, unselfish and honourable men. They had several characteristics in common: both were professionals of high calibre in a calling which used to attract too many amateurs, not of first-rate quality; both were soldiers' sons; both were educated, outside the bounds of their profession as much as inside it; both had original, far-ranging minds; each had more than a streak of the artist in him. They also differed profoundly. Auchinleck's mind was quicker than Wavell's. Both

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 309.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 309.

expressed themselves with cogency and clarity on paper. Wavell had no facility in debate, or even in private conversation; he listened with courtesy and patience, but he lacked both eloquence and small talk; he could, therefore, seem more forbidding—and far more deficient in both humour and perception—than in fact he was. Auchinleck was articulate and affable; his interest in others—as human beings—was instantly apparent; he had ease of manner and charm, but he was capable of shutting both off abruptly and fearfully. As a Winchester scholar Wavell had—intellectually—developed early. Auchinleck matured slowly and late; but a youthful physique and a certain boyishness of manner and of mannerism were for him—as Wavell's silence was for him—merely the protective covering for a powerful and penetrating intelligence. Wavell was a poet, Auchinleck was a painter. In this summer of 1941 Wavell's star, for the time being, waned; Auchinleck's was in the ascendant. They were both men of high, proved courage; but it was as well that the future was hidden from them, for each, had he known, might have prayed that the cup should pass.

\* \* \*

Auchinleck, in assuming his new Command, took a course of action which was in accordance with military discipline and, in its broader aspect, was characteristically considerate and unselfish. Since the vast majority of officers and men under his command in the Middle East were separated from their wives, homes and families, he did not take Lady Auchinleck with him. The consequences in his own private life were to be disastrous. This was a sacrifice which others, from the humble private soldier upwards, were compelled to make, with all its accompaniments of grief and loss; Auchinleck made it deliberately, of his own accord.

Accompanied by his private secretary, Tony Phillpotts, two A.D.C.s and one senior officer, General G. N. Molesworth, then D.M.O. India, he set off for Cairo. The secrecy which the Prime Minister had enjoined was preserved so thoroughly, on all sides, that there was nobody to meet them when, on June 30, they reached the airfield outside Cairo. It was a not uninteresting impulse which had prompted Auchinleck to ask Molesworth to come with him. Molesworth was originally a British Service officer who had transferred to the Indian Army in the nineteen-twenties; he was of a keen intelligence, lively, gregarious, witty and well-informed. He could help to bridge the social and professional gulf which, Auchinleck thought, might open up before him. He could abate the loneliness,

the homesickness for India and the new-boy-in-a-big-school feeling which, however unexpected in an illustrious General, high in the favour of the Prime Minister and the War Cabinet, taking up the most important military Command in the world at that time, were all natural emotions in Auchinleck.

Wavell was grave, friendly and co-operative. As distinct from his Headquarters, his home, a large and beautiful house overlooking the polo ground at Gezira, which Auchinleck was to take over, was in some degree disturbed. One of his daughters had just caught mumps and could not be moved. Wavell had himself wanted to go home to the United Kingdom for a short spell; but at the insistence of the Viceroy and the Secretary of State, supported by the Prime Minister, he was going immediately to India. Therefore, when he set off, Lady Wavell and her mumps-stricken daughter had to remain. Since they had never met before, it was with some gratitude that Lady Wavell recalled Claude Auchinleck's kindness and friendliness in dispelling any hint of embarrassment that there might have been.

Sweeping and radical changes either in the staff or among the commanders in the field had not been imposed upon him (as they were to be on his successor thirteen months later), nor did he wish at the outset to make them himself. In his Chief of Staff, General Sir Arthur Smith, he found a rock of strength and loyal support. Smith, whose regimental career had been spent in the Coldstream Guards, was an Etonian and a member of one of the many branches of a distinguished English banking family; he was shrewd and forthright, with a brisk manner which could not mask his warmth of feeling, his unaffected piety and his goodness of heart. He had given staunch and devoted service to Wavell, towards whom he felt an emotion approaching hero-worship; he was to do the same for Auchinleck, and the two of them were to become close friends through good times and through bad.

Yet in origin their association was fortuitous. The relationship between a Commander-in-Chief and his Chief of Staff in time of war is a crucial one, to which, both in practice and in theory, Continental armies have paid closer attention than have the British or the Americans. The system of deputies which was adopted, in various modes, by the Allies in World War II was unsatisfactory—especially in those instances in which the Commander and his deputy were of different nationalities. The effective military partnerships were between Commanders and Chiefs of Staff capable of the fullest understanding and trust between one another. The Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East in those anxious years did not require a mouthpiece on secondary and routine matters: he needed an *alter*



*ego*, able to interpret and implement his decisions rapidly, to think with him and, on occasions, to think for him. This was the relationship which had subsisted between Wavell and Arthur Smith. Auchinleck was a stranger to Smith when he arrived. It says much for both of them that they were able so rapidly and so whole-heartedly to achieve a not dissimilar partnership. Its cessation, for reasons outside both men's control, had melancholy consequences.

\* \* \*

For the past few months Auchinleck's attention had been concentrated on the multifarious problems of his Command in India—the Prime Minister's belief that it was a rest-cure for a tired man, who could sit under the pagoda tree and watch the world go by, was strangely far off the mark—and, although over the Iraqi episode he had been in touch with Middle Eastern matters, there was no doubt that he needed to be briefed both on major policy and on points of detail.

On June 26, the day before Auchinleck left India for Cairo, the C.I.G.S., in consultation with General Kennedy, wrote him a long, scrupulously careful, profoundly thoughtful letter.<sup>1</sup>

My dear Auchinleck,

On your taking over command in the Middle East, may I add to my congratulations, which I have sent you by telegram, a few words on the situation and perhaps of advice.

After Wavell had captured Benghazi, there was a possibility that he might have pressed on to Tripoli. He could only have done this with very small forces (as the so-called 7th Armoured Division was worn out) in the hope that the Italians were so demoralized that they could offer no effective resistance. But any hope there was of such a venture was ruled out by the decision of H.M.G. to support the Greeks. It then became a case of sending the maximum strength to Greece and leaving the minimum to hold Cyrenaica.

The result you know. We did not leave enough to secure Cyrenaica and the forces we sent to Greece and subsequently to Crete suffered heavily and lost much precious material—material which, as you will realize from your experience in England, is desperately difficult to replace. To right the situation, we did

<sup>1</sup> See also *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy* by J. R. M. Butler, Vol. II, pp. 530–2, and *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, pp. 134–6.

our best to send equipment at express rate and some 295 tanks were sent through the Mediterranean at great risk, and with great luck and good management on the part of the Navy, 238 arrived, only one ship containing fifty-seven was sunk. Then came a very difficult period. It was most desirable to clear the Germans back in Libya at the earliest possible moment, so that the Navy might be able to get the air protection necessary to enable it to attack the enemy's communications with Tripoli and also maintain Malta.

It was also highly desirable to act rapidly in Syria to forestall the Germans.

From Whitehall, great pressure was applied to Wavell to induce him to act rapidly, and, under this pressure, he advanced into Syria with much less strength than was desirable and, in the Western Desert, he attacked before in fact he was fully prepared. The fault was not Wavell's, except in so far as he did not resist the pressure from Whitehall with sufficient vigour.

You may say that I should have minimized this pressure or, better still, that I should have seen that, having been given his task in broad outline, he was left to carry it out in his own way and in his own time. I might possibly have done more to help Wavell than I did, but I doubt it. The fact is that the Commander in the field will always be subject to great and often undue pressure from his Government. Wellington suffered from it: Haig suffered from it: Wavell suffered from it. Nothing will stop it. In fact, pressure from those who alone see the picture as a whole and carry the main responsibility may be necessary. It was, I think, right to press Wavell against his will to send a force to Baghdad, but in other directions he was, I feel, overpressed.

It is about this question of pressure which I particularly want to speak. You may be quite sure that I will back your military opinion in local problems, but here the pressure often comes from very broad political considerations; these are sometimes so powerful as to make it necessary to take risks which, from the purely military point of view, may seem inadvisable. The main point is that *you* should make it quite clear what risks are involved if a course of action is forced upon you which, from the military point of view, is undesirable. You may even find it necessary, in the extreme case, to disassociate yourself from the consequences.

Further, it is necessary that such a Commander should not wait for pressure and suggestions or even orders. He should anticipate these things and put clearly before his Government in the most secret manner how he views the situation and the action by which

he proposes to meet it. He should point clearly to the risks he is prepared to accept and those which he considers too great. He should demand the resources he considers strictly necessary to carry out any project and he should make it clear what he can and cannot do in their absence.

You, in your responsible Command, will never have in the near future all the resources which you would like to have to carry out your great task. You, having served here, know something of the situation and the immediate paucity of our resources. You know too what the essentials are in our great picture—to hold England, retain a position in the Middle East, maintain a firm hold in Malaya and keep open our sea communications, which last-named involves such things as continuing to be able to use West Africa. The time will come when we can strike out with effect and there is hardly a soul in the world outside Germany who will not rejoice at our success and join in our final victory. But in the meantime we have a grim fight to fight and we cannot afford hazardous adventures. So do not be afraid to state boldly the facts as you see them.

The second and last point upon which I would like to touch concerns 'air co-operation'. Nowhere is it good. Nowhere have we had sufficient training. You will find the 'Air' out to help, but they have no complete understanding of what is required of them from the purely Army point of view and how necessary training is. Also, to ensure that our military and air strategy works in complete harmony is uncommonly difficult. It is quite clear that Tedder has to serve the Navy as well as the Army, but his main mission in life is to support the Army to the nth degree in any operation it has to undertake and to support it in the manner most acceptable to the Army Commander concerned. When you have had time to look round, you may be able to let me know how you view the problem and whether I can do anything to help.

I would add that telegrams marked 'Private from General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.' are in fact private, whereas 'Personal' telegrams have a certain limited distribution. I may have told you this before.

God bless you.

Yours ever,

J. G. DILL.

The importance and the interest of this letter, in all its aspects, have been widely acknowledged. It has, however, escaped notice that Auchinleck did not receive it until July 21. That Dill intended

it to reach him as soon as possible is clearly indicated by the fact that it is addressed to him 'c/o Commander-in-Chief, Middle East'. What happened to it *en route*, in the chaotic conditions of postal communications at that time, is not known. But whatever the cause of the delay, it meant that the Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East was deprived, at the moment he assumed his Command and for three vital weeks thereafter, of the candid and sagacious advice of the C.I.G.S., which would have been of the greatest assistance. Long before he had it and could give it the calm and reflective attention which it merited, he had been caught up in the swirl of events and the incessant bombardment of telegrams.

Even the first telegram of all, courteous as was the ceremonial flourish with which it opened, made it ominously clear that the powerful political pressure of which Dill warned Auchinleck would be applied to him as constantly and as relentlessly as it had been to Wavell.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*1 July 1941*

You take up your great command at a period of crisis. After all the facts have been laid before you it will be for you to decide whether to renew the offensive in the Western Desert and if so when. You should have regard especially to the situation at Tobruk and the process of enemy reinforcement in Libya and temporary German preoccupation in their invasion of Russia. You would also consider vexatious dangers of operation in Syria flagging and need for a decision on one or both these fronts. You will decide whether and how these operations can be fitted in together. The urgency of these issues will naturally impress itself upon you. We shall be glad to hear from you at your earliest convenience.

This message, in fact, contained almost all the mixture of factors which were present throughout Churchill's communications with Auchinleck during the period in which the latter was Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East: the overpowering sense of urgency, the abruptness, the passion for detailed and absolute control, and the misunderstanding, all garnished with compliments, and served in the grand manner. The full course of Churchill's relationship with Auchinleck was not a happy one. It is not to be doubted that Churchill pinned the highest hopes on Auchinleck, and that he felt himself to be bitterly disappointed. Magnanimous though he was, he appears never to have realized that the chief cause of his disappointment lay in himself, in his misjudgement and

misunderstanding of the man he had chosen. He blamed Auchinleck, not for Auchinleck's own mistakes, which were by no means negligible, but for something quite outside his control. It is probable that it was also outside Churchill's control.

Churchill was incapable of acting upon Dill's wise advice—to back or sack. He preferred not to sack, if he could see any other way out; but he could not back. He would give Auchinleck everything but his confidence; he would do anything for him except let him alone to carry on with the heavy tasks which had been allotted to him. Churchill misunderstood Auchinleck just as he had misunderstood Wavell before him; but the origins of this misunderstanding lay in defects, not of their character or temperament, but of his own.

It is fair to argue that constitutionally they were under his orders and that—in the supreme crisis which faced the country which he and they served—he had no need of acute psychological understanding of his Commanders, any more than a squadron leader in a small and desperate tank battle in the desert needed that degree of understanding of a young and junior officer under his command. The Prime Minister's will to victory was indomitable and tireless; he spared himself less than he spared anyone else; but had he not been so self-willed and so stubborn in his refusal to concede to his Commanders the patient but vigilant understanding which they merited, many reverses and tribulations, much sorrow and many deaths might have been averted. He not only wore them down spiritually, he compelled them to act in haste or fatigue, and against their own judgment. The hurt which he did to them counted nothing beside the damage which he wrought to the cause to which they, no less than he, devoted their skill, experience, courage and patriotism.

The grief, therefore, must be not on Auchinleck's behalf, but on Churchill's and the country's. Had he been less impulsive, he could have had his victories at far less terrible risk and cost. But had he been less ardent and less single-minded, he might never have become Prime Minister, and Britain would have gone down in shame and surrender in 1940. In regard to many episodes and many relationships in the Second World War, history, as it unfolds, may change the perspective; but the central fact that, but for Churchill's leadership in the first twelve months after he became Prime Minister, there would have been no survival and no victory is unshakeable.

\* \* \*

The pressure on Auchinleck began at once. The Prime Minister followed his first telegram next day with another: 'Once Syria is

cleared up we hope you will consider Wilson<sup>1</sup> for the Western Desert, but of course the decision rests with you.'

Churchill has put it around that he regretted that this advice, subsequently repeated, was not taken. In view of what happened, this is a valid criticism. However, General Wilson, whose record was most distinguished and whose conduct of the Syrian campaign was sound if not spectacular, was sixty years old and had had a long spell of arduous and difficult command in this theatre of war. For the major offensive which was to be launched in the Western Desert Auchinleck preferred to look elsewhere, to trust his own judgment and to reject, courteously but firmly, well-intentioned advice from London.

On July 4 he replied to Churchill's first signal:

Fully realize critical nature situation. Subject to further investigation and consideration my views are as follows:

1. No further offensive Western Desert should be contemplated until base is secure.

2. Security of base implies completion occupation and consolidation Syria.

3. Consolidation Syria includes making Cyprus secure against attack.

4. Immediate action required is therefore elimination Vichy French from Syria earliest possible moment and completion defence measures in Cyprus.

5. Offensive in Syria being prosecuted already with all vigour but hampered by shortage mechanical transport. Iraqi force is giving all possible aid.

6. Reconnaissance shows at least one division required ensure reasonable possibility successful defence Cyprus and plans are being made accordingly.

7. Once Syria is secure, and this implies consolidation our position in Iraq, offensive in Western Desert can be considered but for this adequate and properly trained armoured forces, say at least two and preferably three armoured divisions with a motor division, will be required to ensure success. This is first essential.

8. Final object should be complete elimination enemy from Northern Africa but administrative considerations would entail advance by stages so that first objective would probably be

<sup>1</sup> Gen. Sir Maitland Wilson (subsequently F.M. Lord Wilson of Libya), at the time of Auchinleck's take-over in the Middle East G.O.C.-in-C. Palestine and Transjordan, and in command of the operations then being concluded in Syria and the Lebanon.

re-occupation Cyrenaica which itself would have to be effected by stages for same reason.

9. It is quite clear to me that infantry divisions however well trained and equipped are no good for offensive operations in this terrain against enemy armoured forces. Infantry divisions are and will be needed to hold defended localities and to capture enemy-defended localities after enemy armoured forces have been neutralized or destroyed, but the main offensive must be carried out by armoured formations supported by motorized formations.

10. Second essential to successful offensive is adequate and suitably trained air component at disposal Army for all its needs including fighters, medium bombers, tactical reconnaissance and close support on the battlefield. This is non-existent at present.

11. In my opinion there can be no question of carrying out simultaneously offensive operations in Western Desert and Syria. To do so is to invite failure on both fronts.

12. Third essential to success in any offensive operation in this theatre is close support and constant co-operation of Fleet both in close support of Army and in harrying enemy sea communications. This co-operation is taken for granted but itself entails constant close support by air forces which must be at the disposal of the Navy and additional to those required for close support of Army and for long-range strategic air operations.

Churchill thought it wise to set out the position fully as he saw it. He replied two days later:

1. I agree about finishing off Syria and here we have always thought holding Syria is necessary foundation for holding or re-taking Cyprus. One hopes that Syria may not be long now and that you will not be forestalled in Cyprus. The priority of both these operations over offensive action in Western Desert is fully recognized.

2. Nevertheless Western Desert remains decisive theatre this autumn for defence of Nile Valley. Only by reconquering the lost airfields of eastern Cyrenaica can Fleet and Air Force resume effective action against the enemy's seaborne supplies.

3. In General Wavell's message of April 18 he stated he had six regiments of trained armoured personnel awaiting tanks. This was a main element in decision to send 'Tiger'. Besides this, personnel for three additional tank regiments are now approaching round the Cape. Your need for armoured vehicles is therefore

fully realized in spite of stress which Wavell and you both lay upon further training for these fully trained armoured units. We make out that you should have by end of July 500 cruiser, infantry and American cruiser tanks if your workshops are properly organized, besides a large number of ill-conceived<sup>1</sup> light tanks and armoured cars.

4. This cannot be improved upon in months of July and August except by certain American arrivals and a few replacements from home. Even thereafter remember we have to be at concert pitch to resist invasion from September 1 and General Staff are naturally reluctant to send another substantial instalment of tanks around the Cape (now the only way) thus putting them out of action till early October at either end. After October American supplies should grow and our position here be easier but much will have happened before then.

5. At present Intelligence shows considerable Italian reinforcements of Libya but little or no German. However, a Russian collapse might soon alter this to your detriment without diminishing invasion menace here.

6. Scale of our air reinforcements has been laid before you. . . . It seems probable during July, August and part of September you should have decided air superiority, but then again a Russian collapse would liberate considerable German air reinforcements for Africa and if enemy do not attempt invasion but merely pretend, they can obtain air superiority on your western front during September.

7. On top of this comes the question of Tobruk. We cannot judge from here what offensive value Tobruk will be in two months' time or what may happen meanwhile. It would seem reduction or complete penning of Tobruk by enemy is indispensable preliminary to serious invasion of Egypt.

8. From all these points of view it is difficult to see how your situation is going to be better after middle of September than it is now and it may well be worsened. I have no doubt you will maturely but swiftly consider whole question. . . .

11. About air. I feel for all major operational purposes your plans must govern employment of whole Air Force throughout Middle East bearing in mind of course that Air Force has its own dominant strategical role to play and must not be frittered away in providing small umbrellas for Army as it seems to have been in Sollum battle. In your telegram you speak of aircraft supporting

<sup>1</sup> The possibility of an error in transmission cannot be excluded. Churchill (op. cit. Vol. III, p. 355) renders this word 'miscellaneous'.



the Army and aircraft supporting the Navy and aircraft employed on independent strategical tasks. The question is what are the proportions? This will have to be arranged from time to time by C.-in-C. in consultation. But nothing in these arrangements should mar the integrity of Air Force contribution to any major scheme you have in hand. One cannot help feeling in Sollum fight ['Battleaxe'] our air superiority was wasted and that our forces in Tobruk stood idle whilst all available enemy tanks were sent to defeat our Desert offensive.

Nine days went by before Auchinleck answered this telegram. They were by no means spent in idleness. The Syrian campaign was brought to a satisfactory conclusion. The resistance of the Vichy forces under General Dentz was worn down in some hard, slogging combat from July 6 onwards. Among the forces taking part, on the Allied side, was 10th Indian Division, now under the command of Major-General William Slim, which moved rapidly across the desert from Iraq. When hostilities ended at midnight on July 11-12, there was a host of political problems to solve which were endemic in the Middle East at that time, but the military results were of incontestable importance. British Imperial and Allied forces were in control of a country of sixty thousand square miles, containing a population of ten and a half millions; they now 'possessed a common frontier with Turkey over a distance of three hundred miles and had deepened the zone of defence against any German thrust southward or south-eastward through Asia Minor. Such a thrust was never made; but it might have been made if the Russian front had failed to hold, and at this time none could assess with certainty the Russian powers of resistance against the Nazi invader.'<sup>1</sup>

One of the factors which had contributed to Wavell's difficulties had been the manner in which, as G.H.Q. grew and his military responsibilities increased, he and his staff were overburdened with political, administrative, logistical and technical matters which ought not to have concerned them. Wavell had in fact drawn attention to this situation in June 1940 and had made a suggestion for dealing with it. His plan was not adopted, and as the months passed the burdens increased rapidly. In mid-May, when the Iraqi troubles were at their height, General Sir Robert Haining, the V.C.I.G.S., was, at the Prime Minister's direction, appointed 'Intendant-General' of the Army of the Middle East. There was some confusion about what the Intendant-General was intended to do; and it was

<sup>1</sup> *Five Ventures* by Christopher Buckley, p. 138.

not until May 30 that General Haining received from the Secretary of State for War a directive telling him to relieve General Wavell of some of his administrative responsibilities. However, the Prime Minister wanted him first to examine and report on the whole administrative situation in the Middle East. General Haining, accompanied by several civilian experts, reached Cairo on June 9. He duly reported a fortnight later, and suggested that since his exploratory duties were now over he might take over the executive functions which the Secretary of State had sketched out for him.

But in the meantime the War Cabinet, faced by an urgent appeal from the three Commanders-in-Chief for the establishment of some authority in the Middle East to deal with the multifarious political issues affecting many Government departments and many territories, had decided to send a representative of the Crown to deal with all these matters on the spot. On June 28 Mr. Oliver Lyttelton (later Viscount Chandos), the President of the Board of Trade, was appointed Minister of State resident in the Middle East. His instructions were that he was to relieve the Commanders-in-Chief of all extraneous burdens and to settle promptly, in accordance with His Majesty's Government's policy, many questions affecting several departments or authorities which hitherto had required to be referred home. These included relations with the Free French; propaganda and subversive warfare; finance and economic warfare. He was to give the Commanders-in-Chief the political guidance and support which they felt that they had hitherto lacked. On the administrative side he was to supervise the activities of the Intendant-General; on the political and diplomatic side he was to co-ordinate so far as was necessary the policy of His Majesty's representatives in Egypt, the Sudan, Cyprus, Palestine and Transjordan, Iraq, Ethiopia, British Somaliland and territories previously occupied by the enemy.

Lyttelton arrived in Cairo four days after Auchinleck and immediately set up a War Council under his own chairmanship. Auchinleck thus reaped the benefits of the lessons learned in Wavell's time; and there is no doubt that they were very real benefits.

On July 15, accordingly, Auchinleck gave his calm, considered and detailed reply to Churchill's telegram of July 6:

A. I have carefully considered your telegram of July 6 and have consulted the Minister of State and the Intendant-General.

B. Your paragraph 1. After consultation with C.-in-C. Mediterranean and A.O.C.-in-C. I have decided to adhere to

my predecessor's plan and reinforce Cyprus as soon as possible by one division.

C. Your paragraph 2. I fully appreciate need for reconquering Cyrenaica but see paragraph H. below.

D. Your paragraph 3. Personnel of six regiments referred to in our telegram of April 18 were fully trained with their own type of tanks but lacked individual and collective training for the different types of tank many of them had to man. Characteristics and armament of American tanks introduce certain modifications in tactical handling and a certain time must be allowed for these lessons to be studied and absorbed.

E. While agree I shall have here end of July about five hundred cruisers, infantry and American tanks, past experience has clearly demonstrated that for any given operation we need fifty per cent reserve of tanks. This permits twenty-five per cent in workshops and twenty-five per cent available for immediate replacement of battle casualties. Allowing for fifty tanks in Tobruk and requisite reserves I shall not have more than 350 available for active operations.

F. Owing to casualties to tanks and number in workshops units have had little opportunity for training. Would stress importance of time being allowed for both individual and collective training. 'Battleaxe' showed that present standard of training is not enough, and we must secure that team spirit which is essential for efficiency.

G. Your paragraph 6. This is understood and agreed to by Tedder and self, provided enemy offensive does not develop from north against Syria and/or Iraq.

H. Your paragraph 7. Consider there is every indication that enemy would like to be free of commitment of containing Tobruk and, while I do not intend to alter our present policy of holding Tobruk, I cannot be confident that Tobruk can be maintained after September. Everything possible is being done but enemy air action against ships at sea and in harbour is taking its toll. Furthermore should enemy secure Sidi Barrani (which he could do at any time) it will not be possible to provide the present scale of fighter protection for supply ships to and from Tobruk.

J. Your paragraph 8. I agree that with possible threat from the north our situation may well be worsened. North may become the decisive front. . . .

The first crisis of confidence—for such in fact it was—in the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Commander-in-

Chief thus occurred less than three weeks after the latter had taken up his appointment. It was the presage of much that was to follow. Churchill realized that there were ‘serious divergences of views and values’ between them. This, he has said, caused him ‘sharp disappointment’. In particular, Auchinleck’s assertion that for any given operation a fifty per cent reserve of tanks would be needed, exasperated the Prime Minister, and this feeling had not abated when, in 1950, he gave his own account of the argument. ‘This,’ he wrote, ‘was an almost prohibitive condition. Generals only enjoy such comforts in Heaven. And those who demand them do not always get there.’<sup>1</sup>

On July 19 Churchill again signalled Auchinleck:

*No. 069*

1. Prolonged consideration has been given both by Chiefs of Staff and Defence Committee of War Cabinet to your telegram of July 15 in reply to mine of July 6. . . .

2. It would seem if you had a substantial further consignment of tanks from here and U.S.A. approaching during middle of September together with other large reinforcements, this might act as a reserve on which you could count either to press your offensive if successful or to defend Egypt if it failed.

3. Defence Committee were concerned to see 50th Division, your one complete British division, locked up in Cyprus in what appeared to be a purely defensive role, and wonder whether other troops might not have been found.

4. It did not see how a German offensive could develop upon Syria, Palestine and Iraq from north before end of September at earliest. Defence Committee felt Persia was in far greater danger of German infiltration and intrigue and that strong action may have to be taken there. This, however, is in General Wavell’s sphere, and his evident wish to act is receiving urgent and earnest attention.

5. If we do not use the lull accorded to us by German entanglement in Russia to restore situation in Cyrenaica, opportunity may never recur. A month has passed since failure at Sollum, and presumably another month may have to pass before a renewed effort is possible. This interval should certainly give plenty of time for training. It would seem justifiable to fight a hard and decisive battle in Western Desert before situation changes to our detriment, and to run those major risks without which victory has rarely been gained. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 356.

8. We still think Wilson should have the command next offensive if there is to be one unless of course you propose to take personal command yourself.

9. I should be very much obliged if you will let us know what your general instructions are for immediate future; and you may be assured that our only desire is to sustain you and furnish you with means success.

While Auchinleck was digesting this communication, and pondering his reply to it, Dill's long-delayed but vitally important letter of June 26 arrived. He answered the letter first, with pungency and vigour, and in great detail.

21 July 1941

I apologize for not having written to you before this, but I have really hardly had time to turn round, and I am afraid I am still very much a 'new boy' here. I think I have grasped the broad outline of the situation, but there are many essential matters about which I have still to gain a more complete knowledge. It is a most complex problem and is not made any easier by the disorganization and improvisation resulting from Greece, Crete, Tobruk and the recent Sollum fighting.

However, things will straighten themselves out gradually, but there is a lot of mixing of formations and even units which, though unavoidable in the circumstances, does not make for increased efficiency.

I have two letters from you:

(i) Dated June 26 which arrived some days ago and was written in answer to mine of May 3 and mainly concerns India. Thank you very much for it and all the information it contains. I am passing it on to Wavell.

(ii) Also dated June 26 which has just arrived. This deals with recent events here and how they came about, and goes on to explain my position *vis-à-vis* Whitehall and the pressure which I may expect to be put on me from there. I am most grateful to you for this letter, which puts the whole matter very clearly, and also for your promise of support, of which I have never been in doubt. I quite understand the position and am prepared for it. I had, if you remember, a minor experience in these matters at Narvik!

The pressure has already begun as you know. The Prime Minister's telegram No. 069 of July 19 is an instance.

You may be quite sure that I shall give my opinion firmly and without reservation and that if I think a risk is unjustifiable I shall

say so. I am a little disturbed by the implications of paragraphs 3 and 8 of the telegram I have just mentioned, as I feel that these are matters in which I alone can be the deciding authority, and I intend to be that authority. I fully realize the burden that rests on the Prime Minister and the supreme need for not increasing it, by seeming to run counter in any way to his wishes, and I shall not forget this. All the same there are matters such as these I have indicated, which cannot be settled by anyone except myself. I think you will agree with me in this.

I have not much time as the liaison officer who takes this to you leaves early tomorrow, but I will try very briefly to give you my ideas on the main issues current at the moment.

TOBRUK

(i) I feel that we must do all we can to hold Tobruk. At present we are managing to make supply keep abreast of expenditure and we have reserves in the place—about fifty days. Maintenance is, however, a difficult problem and may become more difficult, if, for instance, the enemy deny the use of Sidi Barrani to our air force.

All the same, I am not going to abandon the place except in the last resort. It is most valuable as a thorn in the enemy's side and if he could get it and use it as a base, it would be most damaging to our position.

(ii) Blamey<sup>1</sup> (pressed by his Government, I imagine) is pressing me to relieve the 9th Australian Division and the 25th Australian Infantry Brigade, which form the major part of the garrison. The morale of the garrison is high and they have been doing some excellent offensive patrolling, but their health and stamina is said to be beginning to suffer.

In any event, it would be a good thing to get them out for a change but it is going to be a difficult and perhaps an impossible business. The Joint Planning Staff are working on it now. If I can carry out the relief I shall put the 6th Division (British) into the place. Blamey is also insistent on the need for concentrating all the Australian troops under one Command and wants them put into Syria and Palestine. This would suit me all right and I propose to work to this end, but it will take time. Blamey's idea is that he should then take command, under Wilson of course, of this corps himself.

CYPRUS

Having decided to hold Cyprus I am determined to make a job

<sup>1</sup> Gen. (later F.M.) Sir Thomas Blamey, G.O.C.-in-C. Australian Imperial Force, Middle East, and Deputy C.-in-C. Middle East.

of it. Putting in scratch units and formations with improvised staffs is no good, and hence my decision to put in the 50th Division. I took this decision after the most careful consideration and in face of some opposition from my staff and I am not prepared to go back on it. Some relevant considerations are:

(i) Decision had to be taken *before* I knew whether Syrian operations were going to end soon or not. Hence 6th Division (British) was not available for an immediate move, and speed was, and is, essential in my opinion.

(ii) I am sure that we cannot afford to use any more Dominion formations in these 'detached post' and 'forlorn hope' operations. British troops must take their share.

(iii) In any event, the South Africans cannot be used outside Africa, the 4th Indian Division is in Bagush, the 5th Indian Division is not yet concentrated or re-equipped, the New Zealanders are reorganizing and re-equipping as are the 6th Australian Division.

So you see I had not much choice if my decision to use a homogeneous formation was the right one, as I am sure it is. If the Defence Council really want to know the reasons there they are!

Of course I realize that the Force in Cyprus suffers from all the disadvantages of a detachment and that it has little offensive value, though it has some as providing air and sea bases. In any event, I am sure that it is a necessary outpost of the defence of Syria and must be held. If it is to be held it must be held properly. We have had our lessons.

#### SYRIA

(i) This is going ahead and you will have had our joint appreciation on the subject. It is most important that we should, by some means or other, be enabled to go forward on to the line Kharput-Malatia-Taurus, which would make it possible to oppose an advance by superior enemy armoured forces with a reasonable hope of success. Once the enemy can deploy armoured divisions in the open, relatively flat country south of the Turkish frontier, our positions round Aleppo, in the Lebanon or round Mosul will always be liable to be turned unless we can oppose him with armoured forces more or less equal to his.

It would be a tremendous thing, therefore, if we could reach agreement with Turkey to allow us to prepare and hold these positions before the enemy moves against Anatolia. I know the difficulties, but I would urge that every effort should be made to reach such agreement.

As regards the Command in Syria, I have already told you that

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I do not wish to move Wilson who is, I think, admirably suited for it.

My ideas for the defence of Syria and Palestine are roughly not lines but a series of localities capable of all-round defence blocking the defiles and approaches. I am elaborating this now. The localities may hold anything from a brigade group to a division but this requires further consideration.

(ii) We are going to have trouble, I fear, and plenty of it from de Gaulle over the Free French position in Syria. It has already started as you will have heard. It is absolutely essential that they should not be allowed to do anything to prejudice the security of our position in Syria so far as its defence against the enemy is concerned. If they refuse to see reason and persist in their present illogical and unrealistic attitude, I am afraid they will have to be dealt with firmly and drastically. After all, we are paying the piper and must call the tune. I realize the delicate political issues involved, but to win the war is our primary object I imagine. . . .

### THE HIGH COMMAND

I feel myself that the administrative control in this Command is too highly centralized and too concentrated altogether. I have not had time to get down to detail yet, but I am pretty sure in my own mind that what is wanted is an operational staff here at G.H.Q., with directors or advisers dealing with the broad administrative policy required to give effect to my operational decisions, and that all or nearly all administrative detail can be decentralized to the Army Commanders, leaving the really big administrative problems of bases, base depots, railways, major repairs, etc. to be dealt with by the Intendant-General, who becomes a sort of super-Inspector-General of Communications. After all a G.O.C.-in-C. should be capable of dealing with nearly all administrative matters, including discipline, awards, promotions, etc. within his own Command. We did it at home. . . . One thing I am very anxious to do and that is to get G.H.Q. out of Cairo if I can. There are far too many distractions here, social and otherwise, and the climate is enervating. This, too, I do not want to say too much about at the moment.

### CENTRAL AND EAST AFRICA

I can see no advantage and many disadvantages in retaining Central and East Africa in this Command now that they have ceased, or practically ceased, to be theatres of active operations. I would like to be rid as soon as possible of all of that area, including Eritrea, Abyssinia and all three Somalilands. We must, I am sure, keep the Sudan for military as well as political reasons.



I hope that nothing will arise to prevent this shedding of unwanted territories! I am anxious to concentrate all our energies to the north.

THE WESTERN DESERT

. . . What I would like to repeat is that it is not sound to take an unreasonable risk. I am quite ready to take a reasonable risk as I think you know, but to attack with patently inadequate means is to take an unreasonable risk in the present circumstances, and it is almost certain to result in a much greater delay eventually than if we wait until the odds are reasonable. I am afraid I shall be quite firm on this point and all the more because I feel you will agree with me. As to what constitutes a reasonable risk, I think that I alone can be the judge. You may be assured that no one is more anxious than I to get going.

In our recent papers sent to you we have tried to balance the needs of our two fronts and I am sure that this is essential. Neither front can be viewed in isolation, and it perturbs me a little to see that in the recent telegrams received from home, this balance between the two fronts is not always maintained. As I see it, there is now one continuous front in Asia and North Africa stretching from Afghanistan through Iran, Iraq, Syria and Palestine to Cyrenaica, and action on it must be co-ordinated throughout. You know all this of course far better than I do, and it is presumptuous of me to talk to you like this, but I am not sure that others are equally alive to it. India and the Viceroy certainly understand it. . . .

By the way, the Prime Minister suggested in his 069 that I might possibly take command in the Western Desert myself. This is a possibility, but would not be sound if there were any chance of our being attacked in Syria and Iraq at the same time. In this event, I feel I must remain detached and able to take an unbiased view of the whole situation. . . .

Two days later Auchinleck replied by telegram to the Prime Minister's 069. He dealt first with the matter of the 50th Division. He had put it in Cyprus only after the most careful consideration. 'If you wish I can send you detailed reasons which actuated me and which appeared to me incontestable. I hope you will leave me complete discretion concerning dispositions of this kind.' A German offensive against Syria through Anatolia might develop in the first half of September, he thought, and continued:

I entirely agree as to the desirability of using present German

pre-occupation in Russia to hit enemy in Libya, but I must repeat that to launch an offensive with the inadequate means at present at our disposal is not, in my opinion, a justifiable operation of war, and is almost certain to result in a further lengthy postponement of the date on which we can assume offensive with reasonable chance of success. To gain results risks must be run, and I am ready to run them if they are reasonably justifiable.

The telegram ended with this summing-up:

My immediate intentions are: First, to consolidate our positions in Cyprus and Syria as rapidly as possible, and to maintain our position in latter. Second, to press on with the sadly needed re-grouping, reorganization and re-equipment of divisions and brigades, which have not only suffered casualties and losses of equipment in Greece, Crete, Libya, Eritrea and Syria, but have had to be [used] in most instances not as formations but piecemeal. Third, with the Intendant-General, to expedite the reorganization and modernization of the rearward services of supply, movement and repairs. Fourth, to safeguard the training and equipment of our armoured formations, without which no offensive is possible. Fifth, to reconnoitre and plan intensively for an offensive in Libya as foreshadowed in telegram of July 19 from Commanders-in-Chief to Chiefs of Staff. As a result of this planning I shall, I am sure, be asking you in near future for further means necessary to success.<sup>1</sup>

Churchill detected, as he believed, 'a certain stiffness' in Auchinleck's attitude which, in writing his account of these matters, he attributed to the influence of the 'Cairo Operations Staff' who, upset by the Greek disaster, had a strong feeling that the new Commander should not let himself be pressed into hazardous adventures, and imparted their mood to Auchinleck. This *post hoc* reasoning is inaccurate and unfair, and must be refuted. Auchinleck's mind was susceptible to the influence and advice of others, but not at this moment when he was surrounded by a new staff whom he did not know, and was feeling his way alone in the midst of the most complex and difficult situation he had ever known. It is of the essence of high command that its holder is lonely; Auchinleck, for reasons which have been outlined earlier, was especially lonely once he was out of India.

<sup>1</sup> The original of this telegram is not in Auchinleck's papers. The text used is that quoted in Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 360.

However, this exchange of increasingly difficult telegrams reached its climax on July 23. The three Commanders-in-Chief addressed this signal to the Chiefs of Staff:

1. We thoroughly appreciate importance of earliest possible offensive to relieve Tobruk but following are essential factors.

2. *Tobruk.* We are now aiming to maintain fully by sea. First week working put in under fifty per cent requirements, but hope to improve on this. Reserves in Tobruk except food, still approximately sixty days. Food, thirty days which could be extended by reduced rations. On the other hand occupation by enemy of Sidi Barrani aerodromes, which we could not at present prevent, would make fighter cover impossible and jeopardize maintenance by sea. Therefore, while we still cannot be certain of holding Tobruk after end of September, we consider there is reasonable prospect of being able to continue to do so after that date.

3. *Naval and Air.* We accept your estimate that there is every chance of our relative air strength improving up to September, and possibly after that date, depending upon outcome of Russian campaign. According to present information enemy has not increased his armoured forces in Cyrenaica during past six weeks, and we know that shipping losses are already causing acute difficulty in the supply of his present forces. If, by maintaining pressure on enemy's ports and shipping, we can prevent serious further reinforcement and continue to make supply difficult, we may be able with air superiority to undertake offensive in Cyrenaica with less than two armoured divisions.

4. *Tank Situation.* (a) By the end of September we shall not have even one armoured division completely equipped and trained.

(b) By October 15 we shall have one armoured division and one army tank brigade fully equipped and trained.

(c) Assuming 150 cruiser tanks arrive here September 13-20, an additional armoured brigade group can be formed. The tank personnel will have had some individual training, but many will come from the unequipped army tank brigade and will have had no tactical training in an armoured division. Furthermore formations will have had no collective training. Unless modified for Desert in U.K., tanks will require two to three weeks in workshops after arrival and formations will not be complete before October 10. Therefore we consider it will not be trained and fit to take the field before November 15. If trained personnel can be sent from U.K. to arrive with tanks, this date might be advanced to

November 1. Therefore by November 1-15 we should have one armoured division, one armoured brigade group, one army tank brigade; all complete and trained.

(d) At present rate of tank arrival including the 150 cruisers you offer, the next armoured brigade will not be equipped and trained and fit to take the field before 1 January 1942. Therefore, if you send us 150 cruisers this September, the earliest date at which we shall have two armoured divisions complete and trained is 1 January 1942. Without the additional cruisers the second armoured division will not be complete before March 1942.

5. *Conclusion.* A. Unless situation changes very greatly in our favour no land offensive is possible in September.

B. We still consider two, preferably three armoured divisions necessary for offensive operations to retake whole Cyrenaica.

C. Provided (i) you send us 150 cruisers by mid-September; (ii) we still retain air superiority; (iii) enemy land forces are not seriously reinforced in the meantime; (iv) a serious enemy offensive is not threatened against Syria; we should be able to undertake limited offensive to relieve Tobruk in November with one armoured division, one armoured brigade group and one army tank brigade.

D. If we can be given 150 extra American tanks by mid-September, we might, subject to provisos in (C) and provided trained personnel as well as tanks are sent from U.K., mount a decisive offensive to recapture Cyrenaica by November 15. To do this we should probably need large numbers ten-ton lorries and considerable numbers transport aircraft for supply purposes. Details being worked out.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

23 July 1941

All your telegrams to us and ours to you show that we should have a talk. Chiefs of Staff greatly desire this. Unless the immediate military situation prevents you leaving, hope you will come at once, bringing with you one or two staff officers. In your absence, which should be kept secret, Blamey will act for you.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck obeyed the summons as quickly as he could. Accompanied by Tony Phillpotts and Colonel (later General Sir Charles) Gairdner, then Deputy Director of Plans in his Headquarters, he set off at the end of July. His journey was hard and uncomfortable.

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. III, p. 361.

As C.-in-C. Middle East he had, of course, no aircraft of his own; and he and his companions, though accorded a high priority, were given no V.I.P. treatment. They travelled in a Sunderland flying boat full of other ranks and ratings, and Auchinleck remembered that he slept on a hard bench with Gairdner's foot in his mouth.

Churchill found his visit 'from many points of view helpful':

He placed himself in harmonious relations with members of the War Cabinet, with the Chiefs of Staff, and with the War Office. He spent a long week-end with me at Chequers. As we got to know better this distinguished officer, upon whose qualities our fortunes were now so largely to depend, and as he became acquainted with the high circle of the British war machine and saw how easily and smoothly it worked, mutual confidence grew. On the other hand, we could not induce him to depart from his resolve to have a prolonged delay in order to prepare a set-piece offensive on November 1. This was to be called 'Crusader', and would be the largest operation we had yet launched. He certainly shook my military advisers with all the detailed argument he produced. I was myself unconvinced. But General Auchinleck's unquestioned abilities, his powers of exposition, his high, dignified and commanding personality, gave me the feeling that he might after all be right, and that even if wrong he was still the best man. I therefore yielded to the November date for the offensive, and turned my energies to making it a success. We were all very sorry that we could not persuade him to entrust the battle, when it should come, to General Maitland Wilson. He preferred instead General Alan Cunningham, whose reputation stood high on the morrow of the Abyssinian victories. We had to make the best of it, and that is never worth doing by halves. Thus we shared his responsibility by endorsing his decisions.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck's impressions of this critical conference and of the informal meetings which were its hardly less important background were somewhat dissimilar. Their dominant motif was that of strain and fatigue. In that 'high circle' of which Churchill wrote with such satisfaction Auchinleck had two friends, Dill and Ismay. He could not but be conscious, in a fashion inconceivable to the Prime Minister, of the endless stress to which they were subjected—and not only the proper stress of responsibility in the tasks which they had undertaken. There was that in Ismay's physique and temperament

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 361-2.

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which permitted him to bear his load with an apparently debonair ease, with wit and with zest. But Dill, sensitive, introspective and gentle, never ceased to suffer. It could be conceded that, from the Prime Minister's viewpoint, the British war machine worked easily and smoothly; but did it get the best out of men by driving them to the limit and beyond?

*General Auchinleck to Lady Auchinleck*

*Chequers,  
Saturday,  
2 August 1941.*

... Yesterday was an awful day. I had to attend a meeting of the Defence Committee in the morning at eleven o'clock. The Prime Minister was in the chair—Beaverbrook, Sinclair, Attlee, Alexander, Margesson, plus of course the three Chiefs of Staff, Dill, Portal and the First Sea Lord [Pound] whom I liked very much indeed. He doesn't say much but he is very straight and honest and has a great sense of humour.

Well, that went on and on and I was put through it properly by the P.M. and some others. At 1.20 they were still sitting, so I excused myself and rushed off to the Palace to lunch with the King. We lunched all alone in a small room and had soup, chicken fricassée and mushrooms, cold ham and salad and a sweet. We drank cider cup. He looked very fit indeed and talked away very freely. He was in great form and very charming. He said he wanted to get away for a bit of a rest and I am sure he needs it. He hoped to get to Scotland where the air is so different. . . .

On his way back to Cairo, delayed for a day or two in Gibraltar, Auchinleck set down some more impressions of his experience in London:

... Last Saturday I had a long day with Winston at Chequers as we were more or less alone and together from 11.30 in the morning till 6 p.m., when Anthony Eden arrived.

We went for quite a long walk in the grounds after lunch and then sat on the lawn. It was a most perfect summer afternoon, really wonderful and the country was looking its best, great lovely trees and the corn ripening. I did wish you could have been there.

Winston was most affable and terribly interesting. He is a very attractive personality and really amazing for his age. He never seems to tire. I do not know how he does it. He went off for a snooze about 6.30 but was down for dinner. Dill, Beaverbrook,

Eden, Brendan Bracken, Tedder and Portal were at dinner and Admiral Pound. After dinner we had a Chiefs of Staff meeting which started at 10.30 p.m. and we were not in bed before nearly 3 a.m.! When I went off Winston was still listening to martial music on the gramophone! Next day I meant to go off early but didn't get away till twelve noon as Pug [Ismay] kept me talking. Winston turned out his guard of Coldstream Guards (about a Company) for me to inspect before I went!

... I dined with Beaverbrook at No. 12 Downing Street on Thursday night. We had a good dinner and there were a lot of interesting people there. I like him; he is a wicked old man but he has a marvellous face and a great sense of humour.

... I have never had a more hectic time than in the last ten days. This continual talking and conferring are very tiring, I find, especially when people try to make you say you can do things which you know you can't. However, I stood firm and won my case I think. I hope I did anyway!

\* \* \*

Some of the personal and practical misunderstandings, at certain levels, had been disentangled for the time being. But they had not been taken out by the roots; and it is open to question whether this was possible. Churchill, for all his superlative qualities of mind and spirit, could not fight and win the war single-handed. This, however, was what he appeared to desire to do. Deep and contrary impulses surged perpetually within him. He was not an omnipotent tyrant; he had to work within the limitations of an old, stable, well-ordered society whose constitutional principles he venerated. As Prime Minister he bowed, with a conscious mixture of pride and humility, to the House of Commons, and he held his Coalition together by the force and magnetism of his personality.

But as Minister of Defence, working rightly in secrecy and at high speed, he could give his autocratic instincts well-nigh full rein. He was the *Generalissimo*; soldiers were there to obey his orders, and if they did not, they could be dismissed, broken or shot. Yet in so far as these impulses were manifestations of deep-seated fantasies, they were bound to be curbed by contact with the world of reality. That commanders in the field were not mere instruments of his will was a fact of which, with his intellect, he was keenly aware, but against which his powerful emotions were in frequent rebellion. He was a man in a rage to win the war, to defend his country and the society and the way of life he knew and loved, and to shatter the evil

challenge of Nazism. For that rage, for the energy, the courage and the inspiration which accompanied it, the world can only be for ever grateful; but it had its other, less felicitous aspects. If generals suffered from it—as they did—they could be regarded as casualties, and their sufferings as part of the price that had to be paid for victory. It is impossible to equate mental or spiritual anguish with physical anguish; and there was plenty of both in the war—at all levels.

The valid criticism of Churchill's relations with the generals was that it was not an efficient way of conducting the war, and of achieving the aims which he sought. He could have got better results more easily and more quickly if he had possessed a wider, subtler and deeper range of human understanding. The extent of his misjudgment of Auchinleck is demonstrated in the passage quoted on page 266. It was not enough that he should be impressed by the General's demeanour and personality: he had to be convinced of the rightness of the General's arguments, and of his professional skill. He never established this conviction; there was sentiment, and that sentiment could—and did—change quickly. Auchinleck on his side trusted the Prime Minister fully and frankly, and liked and admired him. He returned to Cairo on the whole satisfied with the results of his journey to London. He returned to shoulder responsibilities as numerous, as heavy and as varied as had ever been laid on any commander, to face problems of the utmost complexity, in their political aspects no less than their military, and to take decisions of grave and far-reaching consequence.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Planning for 'Crusader'

THE irony of it was that Auchinleck believed that his arguments had prevailed in the discussions in London, whereas in fact his character and manner had pleased the Prime Minister. The battle which he wanted to fight in his own way and in his own time remained, in Churchill's opinion, a 'set-piece offensive'; and the necessary period of training, re-equipment and regrouping, which Churchill had sought to deny him before the London visit, became in retrospect 'four and a half months' delay . . . alike a mistake and a misfortune'.<sup>1</sup>

But Auchinleck had to ponder the strategic situation as it was in August and September 1941, and he had to consider the risks entailed if, as the Prime Minister had so ardently desired, he launched an offensive in the Western Desert as soon as he was back at his post. That he and his staff under-estimated the strength of the Soviet Union's resistance to the German onslaught that summer must be admitted; but this was a mistake which was fully shared by the Chiefs of Staff in the United Kingdom. The threat to the Middle East from the north seemed a very real one in those months, no less real than the threat of the invasion of Britain seemed to Dill and Brooke at the same time. In fact neither threat was carried out, but Auchinleck in his theatre of war, Dill and Brooke in theirs, would all have been justly condemned had their counter-preparations been proved to be less than adequate. The successful outcome of the campaigns in Iraq and Syria, and Wavell's swift, bloodless and very timely operation in Persia, all made it easier to meet a major attack on this front if it did develop; they did not diminish the risk of that attack. In Auchinleck's mind his concept of the one continuous front in Asia and North Africa was a dominant factor in all his strategic thinking; he had to weigh up all the risks all the time.

There was a significant contrast in the attitude of the German High Command towards Rommel during this period and that of

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 364.

the British War Cabinet, Churchill in particular, towards Auchinleck. Rommel was a tactical commander of audacity and skill, full of thrust and vigour, and all eagerness to go and to keep going as far and as hard as he could. But the campaign on which he had engaged was essentially, in the High Command's view, a secondary one, and its tactical considerations, its advantages and disadvantages, had to be subordinated to the grand strategic plan. They kept his achievements<sup>1</sup> rigorously in perspective, and—in view of the maximum outpouring of manpower and equipment on the invasion of Russia—forbade any expansion of the forces at his disposal and refused to encourage any over-risky exploitation of what he had already achieved.

Although he was raised to the status of a panzer group commander in August 1941—a few days after Auchinleck's return to Cairo from England—the forces under his command were not expanded. No further divisions beyond the original two were sent to him during 1941, nor during the first half of 1942; one extra division was built up in Africa from a number of independent units there. This division, the 90th Light, had no tanks and consisted of four infantry battalions, an anti-tank battalion, three field artillery battalions, and a battalion of 88-mm. dual-purpose (A.A./anti-tank) guns.

Rommel's 5th Light Division was renamed the 21st Panzer Division, but was not changed other than in organization and equipment. It and the 15th Panzer Division composed the Afrika Korps; each consisted of two tank battalions and three infantry battalions.<sup>2</sup> The total forces at his disposal at the end of August 1941 were, therefore, the Afrika Korps, the 90th Light Division, and six Italian divisions, the Ariete and the Trieste (the XXth Motorized Corps); the Pavia, Bologna and Brescia (the XXIst Infantry Corps) investing Tobruk; and the Savona, garrisoning Bardia.

The Axis High Command envisaged the role of this quite formidable force at this time as a holding one; and Rommel, despite his

<sup>1</sup> Churchill described them (*ibid.* p. 362) as 'the incredible successes' which had crowned Rommel's audacity. The German High Command, though well satisfied, were less lavish in their praise.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 153. The war establishment of a panzer division was, according to the same source: a panzer regiment of 2 battalions, each of 4 companies, with a total of 194 tanks; a motorized infantry regiment of 3 battalions; an artillery regiment of 3 battalions, with 108 guns, 36 of which were heavy howitzers; an anti-tank battalion, with 36 guns; an armoured reconnaissance battalion, with 30 armoured cars; engineers and ancillary troops. Its personnel numbered some 12,500.

much-lauded dynamism, acquiesced in this decision without demur.<sup>1</sup>

On the British side the Prime Minister could not subdue his impatience for offensive action in the Western Desert, nor conceal his disappointment at Auchinleck's decision not to mount that offensive until the autumn. Here was a commander with a clear and resolute conception of his strategic responsibilities being urged, against his own judgment, to take tactical action which might entail the gravest risk of strategical disaster. He was not prepared to take that risk. He had the agreement and backing of the Chiefs of Staff. The Prime Minister, though he did not overrule and did not dismiss Auchinleck, expressed his vexation in letters and telegrams. Auchinleck refused to be hustled. There was, therefore, a lull in major operations in the Western Desert.

Was it an unnecessarily long lull? Its effect on Rommel must not be neglected. Battling with flies, bugs and a disordered stomach, he dismissed as 'a lot of blather' and 'probably pure gossip' (on August 29) the idea of an imminent attack by the British. And on October 7 he told his wife of his plans for leave: 'I should be able to get away to Rome for a week at the beginning of November.'<sup>2</sup>

Auchinleck, meanwhile, was dealing with graver issues, and certainly had no idea of leave in his mind. Lyttelton, as Minister of State, was energetic, resourceful and authoritative, and without doubt took off his shoulders much of the burden of political and semi-political responsibility which Wavell had borne. On the administrative side the sudden creation of the post of Intendant-General proved, in spite of the splendour of the title and through no fault at all of General Haining himself, to be of no particular value. In July the Minister of State, in agreement with the three Commanders-in-Chief, laid it down that the Intendant-General should direct a whole complex series of administrative concerns—roads, railways, ports, supply, repair facilities, etc.—for all three Services. Strive as General Haining might to carry out these instructions

<sup>1</sup> Agreement was reached between the German and Italian staffs on August 29 that 'In the near future there are no prospects of an offensive being staged from Libya against the Suez Canal.' (Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. III, p. 364). Cf. *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy* by J. R. M. Butler, Vol. II, p. 533: 'The German High Command were not primarily interested in Tobruk or Syria, or Malta. . . . They had other, larger, fish to fry. Indeed it is rather ironical to turn from the interchange of signals between Cairo and Whitehall about the possibilities of finding a brigade group for some operation to German directives for the employment of a hundred or more divisions on the eastern front.'

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 150-1.

according to an agreed procedure, the impression was nevertheless conveyed that some of the administrative staff were being asked to serve two masters, and this was 'not at all what the Prime Minister had intended'.<sup>1</sup> In October, when a Principal Administrative Officer was appointed to the Commander-in-Chief's staff, General Haining was relieved of all duties 'in the Army sphere proper', and was made responsible to the Minister of State, in order to co-ordinate such inter-Service matters as the Minister might direct. 'It is not surprising that . . . the Minister of State supported General Haining's view that the appointment of Intendant-General was superfluous and at the end of the year it was abolished.'<sup>2</sup>

There were several other major issues, all in essence political, but with grave military implications, which had to be dealt with before the ground was really clear for the planning and preparation of the Western Desert offensive. Auchinleck was the Commander-in-Chief of a multi-national Army. The composition of the forces nominally—but only nominally—at his disposal was extremely varied: British (i.e. units raised, trained and equipped in the United Kingdom); Australian, New Zealand, South African and Indian, from the British Commonwealth; Free French, Poles and Greeks. In the nations of the Commonwealth public opinion was acutely sensitive to the proportion of the burden which their forces carried in relation to their numerical contribution, and to the recognition which they were accorded. Axis propaganda, frequently assisted by injudicious and assertive newspaper comment and reporting in the countries concerned, deftly created a picture of a decadent and inefficient Britain having her fighting done for her by soldiers from her 'colonies'. Churchill reacted vigorously against insinuations of this kind, and there can be no doubt of the instinctive wisdom of that reaction. For not only had he public opinion in the United Kingdom to consider: the harmony of the Commonwealth and the unification of its military effort were at stake.

Each nation presented its own especial problem. South Africa was a deeply divided country: that she was in the war at all, and not a neutral like Eire, was due in large measure to the genius of Smuts; and Smuts sustained and expanded, by methods which were as ingenious as tireless, his country's contribution to the general war effort. Yet there was never less than half the white population of the Union that at best was coolly contemptuous about, and at worst openly and sourly inimical to, that war effort.

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The Mediterranean and Middle East* by Maj.-Gen. I. S. O. Playfair, Vol. II, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

India, in her own fashion, was no less divided than South Africa; but the employment of her troops overseas, once the commitment had been accepted, presented different problems. The Indian Army, with all its differences of race and creed, was unitary and completely non-political. The majority of Indian politicians, in Congress especially, were ambivalent about the war, and ignorant and suspicious of the Army. But far-sighted men, like Linlithgow and Auchinleck, regarding the Army as the greatest political unifying force in the independent India which—just as sincerely as the politicians—they believed must emerge, sought to make its achievements, its valour and its endurance in the field known to India as a whole, and not merely to the friends and families of the officers and men themselves.<sup>1</sup> By the development of an Inter-Services Public Relations Directorate, and the use of techniques—such as the employment of commissioned, combatant officers as Indian Army Observers in the field—which were, later in the war, widely imitated (without acknowledgment), the authorities in India fulfilled both their short-term aim of publicizing the work and deeds of Indian soldiers overseas, and their long-term aim of integrating the armed forces into the life of India as a whole.

By the time Auchinleck reached Cairo the Indian troops in his Command—4th and 5th Indian Divisions—had most effectively shown their mettle. Militarily and administratively they fitted smoothly into his force as a whole, and were consistently reliable in every crisis that arose; and such problems as they raised were largely psychological.

The issues of the administrative control and operational employment of the Australians and the New Zealanders were far more delicate. The gallantry and soldierly capacity of the contingents sent to the Middle East by both these countries were beyond question,

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck's opinions and actions in this sphere certainly did not increase the chances of harmony in his relations with Churchill. The Prime Minister's understanding of and sympathy for India were, to put it mildly, imperfect. He urged frequently and stubbornly that Indian divisions in the field, on account of the British troops serving in them, should be described as 'British-Indian' divisions. Auchinleck, more aware of the complications of such a change in nomenclature than the Prime Minister, resisted sturdily. But the Prime Minister's opinion of the Indian Army was revealed most startlingly in a conversation with Auchinleck after the stormy meeting of the Defence Committee on 1 August 1941. Auchinleck said that in India there was a whole armoured division of trained and seasoned soldiers, unemployed because it had no equipment, no tanks and no trucks. 'But, General,' said Churchill, 'how do you know that they wouldn't turn and fire the wrong way?'

and had been proved again and again by the late summer of 1941. But it was in these countries—and particularly in Australia—that there was always the risk of the suspicion growing that their troops were doing more and the United Kingdom troops less than their share of the hard fighting. The heroic Anzac myth of World War I had always had its darker aspects, in the belief that many lives had been sacrificed as a result of the strategic exuberance of Winston Churchill and the incompetence of British generals. These old but vivid memories were reinforced, in 1941, by recent and painful experiences in Greece and Crete.

A day or two after he returned to Cairo from London, Auchinleck had to deal with what could have developed into a crisis over the New Zealand Division, at this time training and refitting in the Delta. The question arose, ironically enough, over Major-General Bernard (subsequently Lieutenant-General Lord) Freyberg's fitness to command this division. Freyberg was a New Zealander by birth, with a magnificent fighting record in World War I,<sup>1</sup> who had taken a regular British commission in the Grenadier Guards. He was deservedly respected and popular in influential circles in the United Kingdom before the outbreak of World War II; but while his military reputation was a legend in his own country, he was perforce little known there. Ignorance bred unmerited criticism.

*C.I.G.S. to Generals Auchinleck and Wavell*

20 August 1941

New Zealand Prime Minister has had information from various sources which leads him to doubt if Freyberg is right man to command New Zealand Division. While Mr. Fraser likes Freyberg and is keeping an open mind this is causing him grave anxiety. It is clear that New Zealand's only division of such splendid men must have a really good commander. Could you let me have your opinions which I would communicate to Mr. Fraser and if General Auchinleck is not satisfied I will ask him to initiate a confidential report.

*General Wavell to C.I.G.S.*

21 August 1941

Freyberg produced one of the best trained, disciplined, fittest divisions I have ever seen and he must be given fullest credit for their exploits in Greece and Crete. I am aware relations between him and his staff and subordinate commanders were not always

<sup>1</sup> He was in the Hood Battalion of the R.N.D. at Gallipoli, was awarded the V.C., D.S.O., and two bars, was mentioned in despatches six times and wounded nine times, and commanded an infantry brigade at the age of twenty-eight.

happy due to Freyberg's passion for detail and desire to do everything personally instead of letting his staff work. I think he wore himself out in Crete through this tendency. If Freyberg is replaced in New Zealand Division, should be very pleased to have him in India. I have no Lieutenant-General's appointment in sight but could give him command of one of the new divisions being raised.

Wavell remained determined that Freyberg should have a fair deal. He thought his own signal over and followed it with a second several days later:

*General Wavell to C.I.G.S. and General Auchinleck 27 August 1941*

Has any decision been taken about Freyberg as it may affect appointments here? I think Fraser will be most ill-advised to displace him as no man could have done more for division. On reflection think I was wrong in what I said about relations with his brigadiers. I only meant that he is not always easy man to serve owing to his keenness.

I propose to recommend him for K.B.E. for his work in Greece and Crete and repeat I should like him in India if New Zealand do not want him though I think they will be wrong to lose him.

Auchinleck at this period was in the forward areas in the Desert, inspecting troops and dispositions. He sent his considered reply to the C.I.G.S. on September 2:

After careful enquiry consider it would be great mistake to move Freyberg from command New Zealand Division to whose training and efficiency he has whole-heartedly devoted himself with excellent results. In action he is a first-class commander. In peaceful periods he is apt perhaps to centralize and pay too much attention to detail which possibly irritates his subordinate commanders somewhat. This tendency probably due to his intense zeal for efficiency. On balance strongly recommend his retention in command division. Am not at present prepared recommend him for higher command.

General Freyberg's subsequent illustrious career, culminating in a highly successful term of office as Governor-General of his native land offered ample proof of the correctness of Auchinleck's decision at this time.

The Australian imbroglio, however, was far more difficult, and no

satisfactory way out of it was discovered. The background to it<sup>1</sup> was the disagreeable but—in a parliamentary democracy—not unfamiliar political situation in Australia. The Government led by Mr. Menzies, who had been in London for some months attending meetings of the War Cabinet, had the smallest possible majority and were being harassed by a vigorous Opposition eager for power. Mr. Menzies resigned on his return to Canberra at the end of August, and was succeeded by his deputy, Mr. Fadden, who, under Opposition pressure, drew the attention of the United Kingdom Government to the widespread concern felt in his country about the position of the 9th Australian Division, which was garrisoning Tobruk.

What the Australians wanted was to concentrate all their forces in the Middle East into a single corps under an Australian commander, and after the vicissitudes of the spring and summer to rest, regroup, re-equip and train them. An integral element in this proposal was the immediate relief of the 9th Division.

*Prime Minister of Australia to Prime Minister of United Kingdom*

7 September 1941

I desire to invite your attention to my predecessor's telegram of August 20 regarding reconcentration of Australian Imperial Force as a single force in one corps and the relief of the 9th Division at Tobruk.

The War Cabinet is pressing for effect to be given to these requests.

Your agreement with principle of concentration was expressed in your telegram of August 9 and C.-in-C. had undertaken to see to this immediately on his return.

It is understood that one infantry brigade and unnecessary base troops have been relieved and that intention was to move the remainder during September when nights are longer. The G.O.C. the A.I.F. is however unable to give me assurances as to when these moves are to be completed. On the contrary he has submitted a proposal made to him that the 9th Australian Division artillery should relieve British artillery, together with statement which throws some doubt on the possibility of general relief of garrison.

In view of decline in health resistance of troops and availability of fresher troops . . . I must reiterate the request of my predecessor that directions be issued by you to C.-in-C. to give effect to our desires. Parliament is meeting at middle of month and it is my

<sup>1</sup> Described in detail in Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. III, pp. 364-8.



desire to make a statement when a withdrawal has been completed, that reconcentration has been carried out. This is a vital national question here and should any catastrophe occur to Tobruk garrison through further decline and inability to withstand a determined attack, there would be grave repercussions.

Churchill sent a full copy of this telegram to Auchinleck, with his own comment:

I am pretty sure they will play the game if facts are put before them squarely. We do not want either your supply of Tobruk or your other combinations to be hampered. If meeting their demands would do this let me have facts to put to them. Australia would not tolerate anything shabby. Of course if it does not make any serious difference we ought to meet their wish.

Auchinleck replied in a long, careful telegram on September 10. He pointed out that in carrying out the relief<sup>1</sup> of one Australian infantry brigade group and an Indian cavalry regiment in Tobruk nearly all the ships had been attacked by aircraft; the naval risks of continuing the relief were, therefore, appreciable. It would have to be done during the moonless periods in the latter halves of September and October; there would be considerable difficulty in finding troops to fill the gap, and the aircraft to cover the operation. The telegram concluded:

I fully realize the political considerations involved and the great importance of meeting the wishes of the Australian Government. I have placed General Blamey in full possession of all the facts and given him every opportunity of stating his views which are strongly in favour of effecting the relief. I have also consulted Generals Cunningham and Morshead, the Commander of 9th Australian Division in Tobruk, who are both immediately concerned in the matter. The matter has today been placed before the Minister of State and the other two Commanders-in-Chief at a meeting of the Defence Committee and they agree with my opinion that to attempt any further relief of the Tobruk garrison however desirable it may be politically is not a justifiable military operation in the circumstances, and would definitely prejudice the chances of success of our projected offensive in the Western Desert.

Subject to your approval I propose therefore definitely to abandon the idea of a further large-scale relief of Australian personnel

<sup>1</sup> 'Upon my representations'. Ibid. p. 367.

in Tobruk and to reinforce the garrison at once with an infantry tank battalion.

The Minister of State strongly supported the Commander-in-Chief:

You will see Auchinleck's telegram. In my opinion the military arguments against relieving the troops are unanswerable. If the troops were English no commander would consider relief. I think there is little doubt that the Government of the Commonwealth is anxious to take out a political insurance policy but the premium to be paid for it, namely grave risks of spoiling vital operations, seems to me too high.

I find it inconsistent to describe the morale as high and the men's power of resistance as low. By all accounts the Indian cavalry were fit to fight immediately after they arrived in the Delta and their powers of resistance to a long drawn out siege are notoriously less than those of white troops. The description of the state of the Australian brigade which has been relieved is also encouraging.<sup>1</sup>

*Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to Prime Minister of Australia*

14 September 1941

I send you in its entirety General Auchinleck's private telegram to me about relieving Australian troops in Tobruk. I do so in complete confidence in your discretion. General Auchinleck's telegram is result of prolonged consultation with Naval and Air Commanders in Mideast.

You will see from his telegram that if you insist upon relief of Australians in Tobruk it is physically impossible for it to be completed in time for you to make statement you desire to Commonwealth Parliament by middle of this month. In fact only half could be removed during moonless period September and other half would have to be removed during latter half of October which is very time when all preparations for offensive will be intense and when preparatory work of Air Force will demand their complete concentration on enemy rear areas, dumps and airfields. In no case could you make any statement to Commonwealth Parliament because any suggestion in public that reliefs were to take place might lead to heavy air attacks on Tobruk harbour and along coast at a time when your troops would be

<sup>1</sup> In his copy of this telegram Auchinleck underlined in red the word 'notoriously', and set beside it in the margin '?!'.  
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withdrawing. If however you insist that Australian troops must be withdrawn, orders will be issued accordingly irrespective of cost entailed and injury to future prospects. I trust however that you will weigh very carefully immense responsibility which you would assume by depriving Australia of glory of holding Tobruk till victory was won, which otherwise, by God's help, will be theirs for ever.

I feel bound again to impress upon you the vital importance of maintaining absolute secrecy about future operations or movements of troops which question of relief of your forces has compelled the C.-in-C. to reveal to us.

Mr. Fadden, in a reply of the most uncompromising nature, totally rejected this appeal, and set out his reasons for so doing, which were summed up in one sentence: 'It is vital to Australian people to have concentrated control and direction its Expeditionary Forces.' This, Mr. Fadden pointed out accurately but not very tactfully, was a principle which had been accepted in the previous war 'not without some opposition'.

'I am bound to request,' he said, 'that the withdrawal of the 9th Division and the reconcentration of Australian Imperial Force be proceeded with. . . . We do not consider military considerations put forward by the C.-in-C. outweigh case for relief of garrison.'

*Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to Prime Minister of Australia*

*15 September 1941*

Orders will at once be given in accordance with your decision. The maintenance of secrecy for the present is of the highest consequence of all.

\* \* \*

For Auchinleck this was a personal crisis. Churchill describes him as 'affronted' by the Australian Government's attitude.<sup>1</sup> This is a singularly unfortunate epithet. His military opinion had been overruled for political reasons; for this he had to be prepared. But in his position as Commander-in-Chief he was responsible, in some degree, not to one Government but to many. It was difficult to see how he could fitly carry out that responsibility towards the Australian Government if it removed from him—as Mr. Fadden explicitly desired to remove—the right to control and direct the A.I.F., whose vitally important role, in future as in past operations, he fully recognized. The position was complicated by the fact that the

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 369.

Commander of the A.I.F., General Blamey, was also the Deputy Commander-in-Chief, whose attitude, Auchinleck could not but feel, had been less than candid and helpful.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*16 September 1941*

... Late last night I had the telegram conveying the Australian Government's 'decision' about Tobruk. I admit that this came as a great blow and that I am seriously disturbed by it. Apart from the fact that I as well as the other two C.s-in-C. and all my advisers, except Blamey, are convinced that it is not sound from the military point of view to effect the relief now, I feel personally very upset that the Australian Government should virtually say that I do not understand my job and that they, advised by Blamey, are more competent to direct operations in this theatre than I am. For there is no getting away from it that is what their telegram means and I feel that Commanders and staff officers who know what my views are and the strength with which I hold them, might now lose confidence in my power to put my considered plans into effect. This is not a very tolerable position. Moreover it seems obvious that the Australian Government can have no faith in my judgment as a Commander. If they had had the courage and honesty to say that they demanded the relief on political grounds, then I should have nothing to say, whatever I might feel as a soldier. . . .

He was disturbed and distressed. He did not press his sentiments to the point of tendering his resignation.<sup>1</sup> Whatever his feelings towards General Blamey, he admired and trusted General Morshead, the Commander of the 9th Division. He also realized that, on this issue at any rate, he had the vigorous (though, as it proved, unavailing) support of the Government of the United Kingdom and the personal sympathy of Winston Churchill.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*17 September 1941*

I am staggered at Australian attitude, but I have long feared the dangerous reactions on Australian and world opinion of our seeming to fight all our battles in the Middle East only with Dominion troops. For this reason, apart from desire to reinforce you, I have constantly pressed for sending out some British infantry divisions. Your decision to put 50th Division in Cyprus was, as you know, painful to us. I know that when you put it there

<sup>1</sup> See *ibid.* p. 369: 'This at this moment would have been harmful from every point of view.'

you thought Cyprus was a place of special danger, but situation has been changed by Russian war and I am sure you will continue to review employment of this British division in what looks like a safe defensive role. . . .

I trust Australian withdrawal will not further delay offensive. The situation has already worsened. The enemy are far better supplied with petrol. African Panzer Corps is now called African Panzer Gruppe. By waiting until you have an extra brigade you may well find you have to face an extra division. Various names of significant places are now creeping into the special information. Your movements of transport and formation of dumps are noted by enemy. The whole future of the campaign of 1942 in Mideast and our relations with Turkey and Russia are involved.

This signal was followed by another, twenty-four hours later, even warmer in tone:

Minister of State tells me you are distressed by Australian attitude and Blamey's conduct. I therefore assure you that the Chiefs of Staff entirely endorse military views expressed in your telegram of September 10. So do the Cabinet and I. We telegraphed this to Australia feeling confident they would accept it as decisive. Great allowances must be made for a Government with a majority of one playing politics with a bitter Opposition, part of whom at least are isolationists in sentiment. Whatever your and our personal feelings may be it is our duty at all costs to prevent an open dispute with Australian Government. Any public controversy would injure the foundations of the Empire and be disastrous to our general position in the war. Everything must be borne with patience and in the end all will come right.

Mr. Fadden's Government fell at the end of the month, and was replaced by a Labour Administration led by Mr. Curtin. Churchill made strenuous efforts to get Curtin to reverse his predecessor's decision—without success.

Two telegrams from Churchill to Auchinleck, both self-explanatory, brought this melancholy episode to its melancholy conclusion.

*14 October 1941*

In view of your statement that it would be a great help to you if relief remaining Australians could be postponed until after 'Crusader' I sent yesterday the following telegram to Australian Government:

*'Prime Minister to Prime Minister Australia. Personal and Secret. I feel it right to ask you to reconsider once again the issue raised with your predecessor. I have heard again from General Auchinleck that he would be very greatly helped and inconvenienced if remaining two Australian brigades could stay in Tobruk until the result of approaching battle is decided. I will not repeat arguments which I have already used but I will only add that if you felt able to consent it would not expose your troops to any undue or invidious risks and would at the same time be taken very kindly as an act of comradeship in present struggle.'*

I now see in current telegram that relief has begun. It may be that new Government will be willing to give you the easement you desire. I would be glad for the sake of Australia and history if they would do this. I do not know exactly what stage relief has reached and you should certainly not interrupt any movement ordered. In a day or two I shall hear what they decide and will advise you.

The Russian news is increasingly grave. All now hinges on you.

And three days later:

Australians have sent an obdurate cable and relief must proceed.

Auchinleck had been an unhappy and unwilling participant in the dispute. If political interference, across a distance of many thousands of miles, in a military commander's dispositions seems distasteful, it is necessary to remember that behaviour of this kind was by no means peculiar to Australia, and that Australia had (in Churchill's words) sent 'her only three complete divisions, the flower of her manhood, to fight in the Middle East'.<sup>1</sup>

In historical significance the unifying political wrangle is far outweighed by the achievement of the soldiers in the field. 'The Australian saga of 1941-2 is magnificent. In February 1941 they could have given us Tripoli and spared us two years of bitter tragedy. . . . Doing more than could honestly be required of them, they saved the day time and again. Than the fighting divisions of the Australian Army in the Middle East from 1940 to 1942 there were no troops more formidable.'<sup>2</sup>

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'War,' Winston Churchill pointed out, 'never stops but burns on

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 372.

<sup>2</sup> Maj.-Gen. Eric Dorman-Smith, M.C. in a private letter.

from day to day with ever-changing results not only in one theatre but in all.<sup>1</sup> Although it was written in implicit criticism of himself, Auchinleck was at all times fully seized of the truth of this lapidary observation. The historian, however, striving to marshal a tidy narrative, is compelled to construct, piece by careful piece, a static representation of a fire where in actuality there was a swirling, hissing torrent of flame. What Auchinleck refused to do was to hurl troops at the first possible moment, ill-equipped and under-trained, into that torrent. For this he has been harshly criticized. His 'caution' has been compared, to his detriment, with Rommel's 'audacity'. But their tasks and their responsibilities were profoundly different. Rommel's defeat could not—and did not—lose the war for Germany. Had Auchinleck staged in the late summer of 1941 a hasty and improvised offensive, as he was so hotly urged to do, his defeat would not have been—in the conditions of war prevailing at that time—a local reverse: it would have been an irretrievable disaster.

Three months elapsed between his return to Cairo and the opening of the battle which was to be given the code-name 'Crusader'. They were three months of essential, gruelling preparation. The men to fight the battle had to be found, allocated to formations, equipped and trained; so had the generals to lead them. There was a third factor, hardly less important than the other two: the supplies of fuel, ammunition and water to sustain a large and (it was hoped) rapidly advancing army in the field had to be built up without the enemy becoming aware of what was happening.

As soon as he was back at his post, Auchinleck's first consideration was his selection of commanders. Much was to turn on this, and several of his choices, now and later, were open to criticism. For several weeks the telegrams and the letters went back and forth between Cairo and Whitehall on this subject. Auchinleck's critics have built up in later years a picture of him as hidebound in his ideas and stubbornly determined to have around him generals whom he knew, preferably from the Indian Army. Nothing could be further from the truth. If his own arrival in Cairo seemed (in the words of one who at that time was an officer on his staff) 'like a breath of fresh air', he was himself the supreme advocate of new ideas and the secker and promoter of new men. On August 16, having despatched to the C.I.G.S. a telegram setting out the changes in command which he wanted to make in the Western Desert, he wrote to Dill explaining his proposals and asking for them to be approved.

'I realize very well,' he said, 'that I am taking a risk in removing

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 357.

commanders who have fought in the Desert, and that my suggested replacements are new to that part of the world. In spite of this drawback I think the changes should be carried out. I feel in my bones that the windows and doors need opening very wide so that fresh air and new ideas can enter, and I believe that this would more than offset any initial and temporary lack of local knowledge in the new men.'

In his telegram he nominated the G.O.C.-in-C. Western Desert (who was to become the Commander of the Eighth Army), two corps commanders and a commander for the 7th Armoured Division—none of whom, as it happened, was an Indian Army officer. Of those named in the telegram only one in fact took up the appointment. One, who was to be sent from England, was not available; one, after further consideration, Auchinleck deemed unsuitable for this particular appointment and posted elsewhere; and one, Major-General V. V. Pope, an expert in armoured warfare, was killed in an air crash just outside Cairo when he was on his way to take up his new appointment.<sup>1</sup> In 1939-45 the vicissitudes of war affected the higher echelons much more sharply than in 1914-18—sometimes felicitously, sometimes the reverse. The obvious choice as G.O.C.-in-C. Western Desert would have been General O'Connor; but in August 1941 he was a prisoner of war.

In this appointment Auchinleck got the officer for whom he asked. This was General Sir Alan Cunningham, whose reputation stood then at its highest. As G.O.C. East African Forces he had played a notable part in the liquidation of the Italian Empire. He was formerly a gunner; he was fifty-four years old, the son of a Fellow of the Royal Society, and the younger brother of the Naval Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, Admiral Sir Andrew (later Admiral of the Fleet Lord) Cunningham.

In his letter of August 16 to Dill, Auchinleck said:

Cunningham I have now met as he came up here with Smuts, and from what I have seen of him and heard of him, I feel that he ought to fill the bill very well as G.O.C.-in-C. Western Desert. The South Africans who will be under him know him well and think a lot of him, which cannot fail to help. He will bring a fresh brain to problems which I feel are getting a bit stale and fishlike. In view of the Prime Minister's strong advocacy of Wilson for the Western Desert, I have sent him a private wire today telling him

<sup>1</sup> Liddell Hart says that he was the first member of the Royal Tank Regiment to reach the higher levels of command. (*The Tanks*, Vol. II, p. 100.) The loss was heavy.



that my final choice is Cunningham. I hope he will understand. I am quite sure that Jumbo [Wilson] is better where he is and I have a very strong feeling that Lyttelton agrees with me. I want you to know that I have been thinking very hard over this problem, as I realize how essential it is to have the right man in the right place. It means everything. I am handicapped by my lack of personal knowledge of most of those concerned, but I am convinced that I am right, and have now no further doubts in the matter. My mind cleared today and I came out of the fog into clear weather! I now want to get the new men straight ahead and into their stride as soon as I can.

This letter went to London by the hand of the D.M.I., Major-General E. J. Shearer. Auchinleck, acutely conscious of the lack of accurate information in the highest quarters in England about his Command (the cause of which, in part at least, was the paucity and irregularity of communications), made it his business to send to London, as often and as quickly as possible, a succession of senior staff officers, each of whom had been thoroughly briefed in his own outlook and intentions and had immediate and close knowledge of events in the Middle East. Shearer was the first to undertake one of these important missions. Even with the highest possible priority, his journey there and back and his stay in London took a full calendar month, from August 16 to September 16.

In the meantime events did not stand still. The convoys bringing reinforcements, tanks and guns—though never enough of any of them—began to converge on the ports of the Middle East, by long and hazardous sea-routes. The new and regrouped units began to take the shape of battle formations. The new commanders were appointed and took up their posts. There was little actual fighting in the Desert, apart from some excellent work at Agheila and beyond by the Long Range Desert Groups, which won the Commander-in-Chief's approbation. Every time the Prime Minister thought about the 'inactivity' in the Desert he became agitated and angry; and he thought about it frequently. On August 25 he 'delivered a diatribe in the Defence Committee, referring in scathing terms to the "600,000 useless mouths" in Egypt and to the lack of activity in the Desert since June'.<sup>1</sup> Dill told Kennedy that he had said, in reply, that it should not be forgotten that Wavell had been pressed, against his own judgment, to attack in June, and that he (Dill) now felt that he had himself been equally to blame for this. He warned

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 164.

the Prime Minister against repeating the mistake and pointed out that, but for the possibly premature attack in June, it might now have been feasible to take the offensive with success.

'Auchinleck stood firm, and after a fortnight or so Churchill appeared to accept the situation with good grace.'<sup>1</sup>

On September 2, after consultation with Admiral Cunningham and Air-Marshal Tedder, Auchinleck issued his first directive to General Alan Cunningham, the Commander-designate of Eighth Army. The object of the autumn offensive, which Cunningham was to carry out, he defined as 'driving the enemy out of North Africa'. It would be divided into two phases: first, the capture of Cyrenaica; second, the capture of Tripolitania. There were, he said, two courses open to Eighth Army in the first phase: either to base its main striking force on Jarabub and advance via Jalo to cut off the enemy's retreat, whilst maintaining pressure and advancing as opportunity offered along the coast; or to attack with its main striking force from the coastal sector, south of the escarpment, and to feint from the centre and south. Cunningham was instructed to prepare detailed plans based on both alternatives and to submit them, with his recommendations, for decision after October 1.

The Commander-in-Chief laid emphasis on the fact that this would be a combined operation, calling for close co-operation between all three Services; he drew attention to the problems of supply and maintenance, and he outlined for Cunningham the forces which it was probable he would have at his disposal.

\* \* \*

In this period of preparation the Western Desert was the focus of many soaring hopes, much detailed and ingenious planning and an almost infinite range of speculation. The hopes were political and strategic. The planning and the speculation were military and tactical. They had to be set against the background of reality: the Desert itself.

Lore and legend develop with remarkable speed in war time; by the autumn of 1941 the sheerly technical and practical aspects of fighting in the Western Desert already carried a heavy, romantic, confused and confusing encrustation of legend. Victory and defeat were, by the quick and consolatory processes of soldiers' memories, already mingled in myth. Therefore Auchinleck's eager and realistic search for new ideas. He himself regarded the Western Desert with

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

no romantic illusions, and he desired subordinate commanders who shared his own outlook. (He did not always get them.)

The most obvious facts about the Western Desert were the most important: it was large and it was empty. It is in the highest degree unlikely that, in the foreseeable future, men will fight any war bearing any resemblance at all to World War II; but in the conditions prevailing at that time—1940-3—it might appear that the Western Desert had been designed by a Providence at once merciful and ironic as the wellnigh perfect battleground for the kind of forces, armed and equipped as these were, which in fact then fought over it. Such a conjunction is rare in human affairs. If war had been, as the theorists have striven to make it, only a vast chess game, then the Western Desert was an excellent board. The hazards were neatly and cunningly disposed; the contestants were not too unevenly matched; and the ground provided a fascinating selection of tests for their skill, their capacity for manoeuvre and swift movement, their endurance, their ingenuity and their boldness.

The Desert was designated as the setting of the first phase of the offensive outlined in Auchinleck's first directive to Cunningham. It proved to be the setting of all the operations during his tenure of the post of Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East. It stretched almost exactly five hundred miles, as the crow flies, from El Alamein, on the coast of Egypt eighty miles west of Alexandria, to El Agheila on the Gulf of Sirte, on the border between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Such inhabited areas as existed were scattered along the coast-line which, for the soldiers (though not for the sailors and the airmen) was the northern edge of the board. The only communications, road and rail, kept close to the coast. The Desert itself was a plateau, which shelved steeply down to sea-level; this shelf was known, in Desert warfare terminology, as the 'escarpment'. Where the coast-line bulged between Derna and Benghazi, the escarpment became a range of hills, cultivable and wooded. Southward the Desert stretched for many hundreds of miles, its rocky, barren wastes broken by a few widely separated oases—the ancient and famous Siwa within the Egyptian frontier, and Jarabub and Jalo in Cyrenaica. Its eastern boundary, providing a natural defence system, was the great Qattara depression, impassable for vehicles and infantry; but between the depression and the coast at El Alamein there was a small, forty-mile wide gap of open desert. To the west the Desert shaded into the cultivated, colonized lands of Tripolitania.

Men who fought there and lived to look back on it said that there was a 'cleanness' about the Desert war. This was in truth the Desert's gift; it was as a landscape neither outraged, obscenely

inappropriate, like the orchards and wet, green meadows of Normandy, nor frankly and stubbornly hostile, like the jungles of Burma; its only challenge was that of a massive, everlasting neutrality. Its few physical assaults, dust-storms and mosquitoes, were irritating rather than daunting. It could be very hot and very cold, but within such limits that lean and hardened bodies were braced, not sapped of energy and resource. The rate of sickness in the Desert Army was low; physical well-being was normal. There was much less fuss, therefore, than in other theatres of war about amenities and comforts, and much less need for them. Men's attentions were concentrated on keeping alive and fighting.

The Desert imposed its own rules of warfare. Like the rules of other games they developed out of the nature of the ground. The planning staffs expended a great deal of ingenuity and effort in trying to extract every inch of advantage for their own side out of a skilful use of the rules. Over the years in which the campaigns swung back and forth, there developed a pattern of advance and retreat, almost as formal as the opening moves in a game of chess. The board was divided not into squares but into zones. There were two zones of movement interpolated between three zones of decision, east, central and west.

General after general faced these facts of life and death, and dealt with them as best he could. In advance you leapt from Matruh to Sollum-Bardia; between Sollum and Gazala you fought; if you won, you swirled on, took Benghazi and reached the westernmost limit of your line of supply at Agheila. In defence, if you could not hold Agheila you raced back to Gazala, dropping Benghazi as you went. Between Gazala and Sollum you fought; if you lost there, you turned and fought at Matruh, and at your back—more fortunate than Rommel at the western end of the Desert—you had the ultimate rampart of Alamein.<sup>1</sup>

The Desert was a single, huge battlefield, which was perpetually stripped for action. Its emptiness, so far as logistics were concerned, was absolute. If you wanted anything, you brought it with you, or (if you were lucky) you captured it from the enemy. The needs of an army in World War II were numerous and diverse; but they were summed up under five main headings: ammunition, fuel, food, water and repairs. A Western Desert force in advance was in far too much of a hurry to halt and wait for these needs to be fulfilled, slowly and laboriously, along the very inadequate lines of communication. The same force in retreat, having expended and

<sup>1</sup> Sir Arthur Bryant called it 'the last ditch'. In that ditch the tide of the war turned.

lost much of what it set out with, needed urgent and rapid replenishment, to provide which there were large supply dumps in the Desert. Concealing these and guarding them from the enemy was an important part of Desert warfare. Logistics therefore governed tactics.

In preparation for the offensive two major constructional enterprises were launched. Hitherto the railhead and the main water-point had been at Matruh, which was some 130 miles from the frontier. This, as Auchinleck pointed out in his despatch,<sup>1</sup> 'was nearly twice the accepted distance between railhead and front, and the frontier was only the starting-line, the proposed battlefield being about seventy-five miles farther on'.

A new railway going westwards from Matruh had been begun in Wavell's time. By the end of October a new railhead was opened at Bir Misheifa, seventy-five miles west of Matruh—with a dummy one to deceive the enemy six miles farther on—and brought an immense saving in transport, the carrying capacity it gave being equal to that of 2,700 lorries. Even so the maximum that could be delivered by this means, in the way of ammunition, fuel and supplies, fell short of the estimated daily requirements of the Force by about one third. The dumps, the chief of which were in the oases in the south, took on a considerable importance. Between the beginning of September and the middle of November nearly thirty thousand tons of munitions, fuel and supplies were stored in the forward area. Yet there was only enough to cover the difference between the daily rates of delivery and consumption for one week at most. When they were exhausted, either the size of the force had to be reduced or an alternative source of supply opened up. Tobruk, therefore, mattered logistically much more than in prestige. It would have to be relieved within a week, for only during that week could the full impetus of the attack be sustained.

The problem of water, hitherto lorryborne or seaborne, was solved separately. On September 6 Auchinleck issued orders that two known sources of water at Fuka and Buq-Buq should be developed, and that a pipe-line should be laid between Alexandria and the forward areas. On November 11 the new water-point was opened sixty-five miles west of Matruh. In two months, in the face of all manner of difficulties, 145 miles of pipe had been laid and filled, and ten large reservoirs and seven new pumping-stations had been built.

The Desert had by no means been tamed, but some of its hazards

<sup>1</sup> *Operations in the Middle East from 1st November 1941 to 15th August 1942. London Gazette*, 15 January 1948, p. 24.

to an operation of the size envisaged had been diminished. These administrative processes were unspectacular, and the Prime Minister was dismayed by the time which they seemed to occupy; but they could make all the difference between victory and defeat—or between a fruitful and an empty victory—in the battle on which the Prime Minister had pinned his hopes.

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War in the Desert was a war of movement. The infantry played their ancient, inevitable and decisive part, but they were no longer pinned down in the slaughterous sterility of trench warfare. Movement in the 1939-45 war meant, above all, the tank. The way to victory was opened up by tanks; it could only be barred by artillery strong enough to hold and break a tank advance. By the time Auchinleck reached the Middle East there had been built up a considerable fund of knowledge and experience of armoured warfare in the Western Desert. Bold theories abounded among the staff; some valuable lessons had been learned, some ignored. Auchinleck now found himself at the centre of the unresolved controversy between the cavalryman and the garage-hand, which has been referred to earlier. Did you use armour as military commanders in earlier wars of movement had used their cavalry—closely integrated at all phases of the battle with other arms; or did you, imitating admirals at sea, regard tank combat as an end in itself?

The argument raged unabated during the whole of Auchinleck's tenure of his Command, and was sharpened in intensity by the vicissitudes of the campaign. The question of the tactical handling of tanks in the Desert could not, however, be separated from the equally vexed question of the differences, qualitative as well as quantitative, between the armoured forces at each commander's disposal. These were indeed crucial, for as Auchinleck said in his despatch: 'The German armoured divisions were the backbone of the enemy's army and to destroy them was our principal object.'

The number, efficiency and firepower of the tanks on both sides were topics of arguments for years afterwards. Brigadier Desmond Young said in 1950: 'In November 1941, we went into action with 455 tanks against Rommel's 412 . . . we had not a tank that was fit to fight the German (Panzer) Mark IIIs and Mark IVs. Before our tanks, mechanically unreliable and armed with their pitiful two-pounder gun, could even begin hitting the enemy tanks effectively, they had to close them by 800 yards. While they were doing so, they were all the time under fire of 50-mm. (40-pounders) and

75-mm., against which their armour was no defence. We had no effective anti-tank gun at all.<sup>1</sup>

Major-General Eric Dorman-Smith, subsequently D.C.G.S. to Auchinleck, but at the time of the 1941 autumn offensive Commandant of the Staff School at Haifa, said in 1951: 'By Rommel's standards the Eighth Army was definitely inferior in armoured gun-power, and anti-tank fire-power.'<sup>2</sup>

The South African Official History, published in 1957, went into great detail about the armoured forces on both sides:

To oppose the 535 British cruisers and 25 light tanks, 213 Matildas and Valentines, Rommel's Afrika Korps had 249 tanks of which 70 were Panzer IIs. The latter, an obsolete model with light armour and no heavier armament than a machine-gun, could not be used in a pitched battle against opposing tanks. The German total also included five British Matildas, for which their captors entertained a great respect. Soon after the battle was joined, Rommel was given control of Ariete and Trieste Divisions, with 146 M 13/40 tanks [which] . . . were obsolescent, carrying thinner armour than the British cruisers, and their 47-mm. gun had a lower velocity and less penetration than the British two-pounder. These tanks were handled with some dash when Ariete Division first came into action, but their crews soon discovered that they were no more than . . . 'self propelled coffins', and thereafter were disinclined to challenge the British armour on equal terms.

In battle, therefore, the Germans were obliged to rely on their 139 Panzer IIIs and 35 Panzer IVs. The latter acquired a fearsome reputation, and were always identified in large numbers wherever German transport congregated, but their class number had nothing to do with any superiority over the Panzer III. The Panzer IV was designed as a general-purpose medium tank and was equipped with a short-barrelled, low-velocity, 75-mm. gun which normally fired high-explosive shell. It was, in the words of one highly qualified observer, 'an efficient destroyer at close range of anti-tank guns, machine-gun posts, and other obstacles to a German advance'. It was not, however, a 'killer of tanks'. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, the official historian of the Royal

<sup>1</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> An unpublished paper, communicated to the author.

<sup>3</sup> *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 36.

Tank Regiment, writing in 1958, put the Germans' and Italians' numerical strengths at the same figures as did the South African historians, but said that only the 174 mediums (the Panzer IIIs and Panzer IVs) 'would really count in the armoured battle'. He added: 'Rommel had no reserve of tanks, except under repair.' But his figures of British tanks were far higher than any previously given: a total of 756 'gun-armed tanks'—336 cruisers (mostly Crusaders), 195 Stuarts, and 225 'I' tanks (Matildas and Valentines)—with a further 259 in reserve and ninety-six more in shipment. British tanks in reserve, he said, were sent up at the rate of forty a day.

In Liddell Hart's view the Germans' one important advantage was that two-thirds of their total of anti-tank guns were long-barrelled 50-mm. Pak 38, which could penetrate 50 mm. of armour, compared with 40 mm. by the British two-pounder. He continued:

The British had available in their 3·7 A.A. gun a potential tank-killer even more powerful than the German 88-mm.—and possessed three times as many. But they did not try to apply the 3·7 to an anti-tank role (although its value for such a purpose was repeatedly urged on the War Office by Tim Pile, the ex-R.T.R. Commander-in-Chief of A.A. Command, from his expert knowledge of both spheres).<sup>1</sup>

The academic interest of the subsequent debate should not be allowed to disguise the fact that, in the critical phases of 'Crusader', brave men paid with their lives for certain grave deficiencies for which they themselves were in no way responsible, whether these were in the leadership and tactical expertise of their commanders, or in the armour and armament of the tanks with which they went into battle.

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The men of the Eighth Army of the autumn of 1941, who were later refused permission to put the numeral '8' upon their Middle East medal ribbon, however stubbornly Claude Auchinleck strove to get it for them, of what sort were they? They were by no means a homogeneous Army. They numbered on the eve of the offensive some 118,000 officers, N.C.O.s and men. Such survivors as remained

<sup>1</sup> *The Tanks* by Capt. B. H. Liddell Hart, Vol. II, p. 102. The South African historians make the same point about the advice given by General Sir Frederick Pile, and offer some curious reasons for its rejection.



of Wavell's advance of a year before, of the reverses and retreat of the spring and of 'Battleaxe', were the Desert's seasoned veterans, and many of them, in the interim, had campaigned elsewhere: in Greece and Crete, in Eritrea and in Syria. The New Zealanders had left many of their best in the pass that men still call Thermopylae. The 4th Indian Division had climbed the hard, sun-drenched scree of Keren. But a number of the commanders and the formations, and many of the officers and men were new to desert warfare. There were long-service regulars, volunteers, peace-time territorials, and post-1939 conscripts serving alongside each other. The Desert, however, was a speedy leveller; certain national characteristics in units brigaded together were obviously indestructible, but many differences of class and background which, in other circumstances, men deemed to be of great importance, sank into triviality.

The mood of the Desert Army in late 1941 has been largely overlaid by memories of later reverses and disappointments, and of Alexander's victorious offensive in 1942-3. It was an Army whose morale and hopes were high. Its very existence, let alone its capacity to mount a big offensive, was a matter for wonder and joy. The real miracle of 1940-1, however, was not simply that Britain had survived, but that her people had retained—after the wasted years and under vigorous and widespread air attack over many months—the energy and the resolute will to hit back with growing strength, on land, by sea and in the air, and the stubborn belief, which was inspired by Winston Churchill, in victory at the end. The Desert Army was the creation of that energy, that will and that belief in victory. It was not itself the instrument of final and complete victory, and none who served in it thought that it was. What they believed both before the battle and afterwards, when weaknesses in equipment, training and leadership had been ruthlessly exposed, and the penalties paid for those weaknesses, was that theirs was a sizeable and essential contribution to that final victory. They and their experience were part of the arduous process of learning to fight and win a war.

The forces allocated to General Cunningham for 'Crusader' were: 13th Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General, later General Sir Alfred, Godwin-Austen, and comprising the New Zealand Division (Major-General Freyberg), the 4th Indian Division (Major-General, later General Sir Frank, Messervy), and the 1st Army Tank Brigade (Brigadier H. R. B. Watkins); 30th Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Willoughby, later Lord, Norrie, and comprising the 7th Armoured Division (Major-General W. H. E.—'Strafer'—

Gott), the 4th Armoured Brigade Group (Brigadier, later Major-General, A. H. Gatehouse), two brigades of the 1st South African Division (Major-General G. E. Brink), and the 22nd Guards (Motor) Brigade (Brigadier, later Major-General Sir John, Marriott); the garrison of Tobruk, commanded by Major-General, later Lieutenant-General Sir Ronald, Scobie, which now comprised the 70th Division and the Polish Carpathian Infantry Brigade Group (Major-General S. Kopanski); a force based on the southern oases, consisting of the 6th South African Armoured Car Regiment and a battalion group from the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade, under the command of Brigadier, later Major-General Denys, Reid; and in reserve the 2nd South African Division, consisting of two brigades, commanded by Major-General I. P. de Villiers.

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General Cunningham and his staff settled down to plan the offensive along the lines required by Auchinleck's directive of September 2. While they pondered the two alternative proposals advanced in this directive there was much anxious and eager thought being given to the forthcoming battle not only in Cairo but in London; on the other side of the hill, in Rommel's Headquarters and in the German High Command there was a certain amount of activity.

When Shearer returned to Cairo in the middle of September he brought with him a brief, friendly note to Auchinleck from Dill in his own handwriting, dealing mainly with personal matters and with the developments in Persia. He also brought two other very important letters:

*General Ismay to General Auchinleck*

*28 August 1941*

I am taking the opportunity of John Shearer's return to send you a line. It has been valuable to us to have him here; and he had a long and useful talk with the P.M., which he will of course tell you about.

The P.M. thoroughly enjoyed his visit to the President, and has returned full of health and energy. He was, on the whole, pleased with the results, and is particularly delighted at having established such an intimate personal contact with Roosevelt. I dare swear that they admire each other immensely. Personally, I cannot help being a little disappointed. It is true that the Joint Declaration,<sup>1</sup> if read carefully, is a very weighty document, but I had hoped that

<sup>1</sup> The Atlantic Charter.

America would take a more definite and more dramatic step towards full participation. We'll never get a third of the production for which they have the potential until they are in the fight.

I shall be very interested to hear about your impressions of Smuts. Everything that he has said and done since the war started seems to stamp him as a very wise old bird. Incidentally—and this is, I think, a justifiable breach of confidence—he was loud in your praises in his private wire to the P.M.

Your telegraphic appreciation met with a mixed reception. The C.O.S. entirely agreed with it, and said so emphatically; but the P.M. went all over the ground that he traversed during that stormy meeting before our visit to Chequers, and marshalled exactly the same arguments. At the end of it all he seemed—temporarily—resigned, but, like Rachel, refused to be comforted. You needn't worry at all that his confidence in you has been impaired. I know it hasn't; but I do advise you most earnestly to write him a long private letter, telling him your hopes and fears more fully and more freely than is possible in a telegram or even in an official letter.

The point that you want to get over above all others is that a tank force, which has not got superiority, cannot take as much or as little as it likes of a fight: and that if it starts off with the idea of making the enemy use up his substance, it may quite easily get knocked out. Isn't a tank battle in these days much more like a naval battle, than a land battle of the last war? If so you might paint your picture in those colours. I've tried to, but failed!

Another point is this. He was quite hurt that you applied the epithet 'appreciable' to the reinforcements of M.T. that you have recently had from the U.S.A. If you had said 'M.T. from the U.S.A. is coming along splendidly; but the demands of modern armies in desert warfare are so insatiable that we are still short', you would have made your point and he would have been perfectly happy. As it is, he regards the epithet 'appreciable' as a reflection on or at least a grudging acknowledgment of the efforts and sacrifices made at Home to keep you well supplied!

But the main point is—do write him long personal chatty letters occasionally. I know that normally you would recoil in your modesty from doing so. But he isn't a normal person (Thank God), and these aren't normal times.

I'm so sleepy, Claude; and brain and hand are very tired. So forgive this very disjointed and illegible scrawl.

I think of you a lot in your immensely responsible job; and like all your friends, I'm supremely confident of your success.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck**August 1941*

My dear Auchinleck,

I was depressed by receiving your Telegram No. 1549,<sup>1</sup> in which you spoke about no action before November and advocated patience. It is not a question of 'impatience' or 'patience' but of balancing risks, which are grievous either way.

I was also chilled by your remark that M.T. was now arriving 'in appreciable quantities'; because my figures show me you have received in June, July and August over 18,000 trucks, while in the same time the enemy have not received above 1,700.

However, I have had the advantage of several long talks with General Shearer, and he has explained for my most secret information something of what you have in mind, the look of which I like very much. I agree that it would be worth waiting for something like that, providing the enemy and the general march of events allow it. It looks much more likely than it did when you first took over the Command in M.E., or even when you were here a month ago today, that the necessary time for thorough preparation and massing will be given us. The Russian resistance is impressive, and it seems almost certain that Hitler will be entangled in the Russian miscalculation and morass during the whole winter. This will be hard for him on account of our bombing in the West and of the difficulties of supplying his vast army in the East, which will, I am assured from Russian sources, be subjected to strenuous counter-attack. All reports tend to show no increase in the German Africa Corps, and that their health and conditions are far from good. The maintenance of this force by Germany and Italy in Africa is costly, and as we sink twenty-five per cent of their convoy shipping and damage another ten per cent, I agree that it is doubtful whether they will be able to maintain a substantially larger force than they have now got upon the ground. There remains the serious danger of their rapid reinforcement by Air tending to deprive us of our Air superiority, so painfully acquired. However, here again the Russian prolongation and the German Air Force losses of that campaign give further reassurance. It may therefore be possible that you will have the time you need or demand. General Smuts, with whom I have been in correspondence, was favourably impressed by all you told him in Cairo.

You are I am sure aware of the dangers of delay, and the very high price which may have to be paid for it. It is inexplicable to

<sup>1</sup> No copy of this signal, which is the 'telegraphic appreciation' referred to by Ismay above, is in the Auchinleck papers.

the general public that we should remain absolutely inert during these months when the enemy is involved in Russia; but I can assure you I am only looking at the merits of the Middle Eastern problem, and not worrying about public opinion here, which I believe I can guide. It is on those merits that I am sure you will feel that every day that could be saved would be a diminution of risks of the situation altering to your detriment. However, I say no more on the point, as I am sure you must after all our talks see the case in all its bearings.

Meanwhile I have set in motion a good many things which should help you. First, the whole of the 1st Armoured Division will be sent, and should be with you by mid-November. The fact that this powerful reserve will be approaching should make you more free to throw all in when the time comes, because even in the event of failure (and no one can guarantee success in a great battle) you would have additional means of defending Egypt against any counter-stroke by a damaged and weakened enemy. Secondly, the 250 Bofors guns are on their way, so that you should be able to have a proper moving 'flak' for your columns and assembly points. As this consignment is additional to the regular supplies, I trust it will not be inroaded upon for the static defence of ports, but will be used to liberate the Air Force for its main strategic and tactical contribution to the battle. Thirdly, in order to hamper the enemy's accumulation of supplies, I have arranged to send our last four suitable submarines from the Bay of Biscay to the Mediterranean and for two additional Blenheim squadrons to operate from Malta. This should greatly increase the stringency of the enemy's supplies.

While, however, we thus try to turn off the tap by which the enemy's barrel is filled, can you not make it leak more freely by boring holes in its bottom? Tobruk should surely be the scene of ceaseless wearing down action, our troops being relieved in a manner not open to the enemy. I still feel that here is a place where the 'T' Tank with its short range might play an important part. It is not a question of moving far out into the Desert, or capturing El Adem at this stage, but simply of forcing the enemy to fire off his scanty ammunition and use up the life strength of his troops, cumbering himself also with wounded. An endless gnawing action developed from Tobruk would seem to be in harmony with all your larger conceptions. Now we can see how foolish were those who thought Tobruk should have been given up, and what a decisive strategic part it played in the defence of the Nile Valley. . . .

I am trying very hard to obtain shipping from here and the United States to send two more divisions from here to the Middle East, arriving in December or early January. Whether I shall succeed is not yet known.

I am also considering an additional reinforcement of the Middle East Air, having regard to Persia and the Caspian, by drawing on the fighter strength available for home defence (now 100 squadrons) after the invasion season has passed. . . .

The destruction of Rommel's army and Italian auxiliaries is by far the greatest military event open to the British arms in 1941. It justifies the greatest sacrifices and hazards. The defeat of a German corps by the British would have resounding effects in every land. Indeed, no one can measure the benefits that might flow therefrom. Once you have settled your Western flank satisfactorily by destroying the armed force of the enemy, it seems unlikely they would try the same game again. All your armies would therefore be free in conjunction with Wavell's to give their right hand to the Russians, and to animate or even to draw in the Turks. Nothing can compare with this, and you may be sure that we shall back you to the utmost, well knowing the hazards and disappointments of war.

You are I am sure, as you told me, always reviewing the position of the 50th Division in Cyprus, which is clearly affected by any improved attitude in Turkey and any reinforcements of our Air Force in Syria.

I am very glad you sent General Shearer home at this time, and the talks I have had with him have added to my confidence in you and all your plans.

With every good wish,

Believe me,

Yours very sincerely,

WINSTON S. CHURCHILL.

On September 16—the very day on which Shearer arrived with these two letters—Auchinleck, taking Ismay's advice promptly and literally, wrote a long, frank reply to the Prime Minister, answering as many of his points as possible and striving to allay his anxieties.

My dear Prime Minister,

Thank you very much for your letter. . . . I was afraid you would be disappointed by the telegram in which I tried to appreciate the situation for you. I realize to the full the need for speed and for balancing risks and I think of little else. I would, however, be

raising false hopes if I were to say to you that I can see any prospect of carrying out a real offensive before November. . . .

We are preparing forward bases of supply near Sidi Barrani and at Jarabub in the south; the forces necessary to cover these processes are being advanced and some of them are already in position. The advancing of a substantial force, including armoured forces, to the Sidi Barrani area will remove, I hope, the threat of an enemy *coup* against the landing grounds there, which is very important to us as enabling our fighters to operate over Tobruk and cover its maintenance by sea, as they cannot do this effectively from further back. Up to date, we have only been able to maintain light unarmoured forces to cover these landing grounds, and this has been a source of considerable anxiety to me. I hope that from now on they will be secure against anything except a very heavy armoured attack which I do not think the enemy can attempt.

The object of preparing these two advanced bases so far apart is to give us flexibility, and to enable us to shift the centre of gravity of our attack from north to south or vice versa as circumstances may demand, and so mystify the enemy. We cannot conceal the existence of these advanced bases, but I hope we can conceal the direction and strength of our blow. . . .

I must digress here to apologize to you for my use of the word 'appreciable'. It was never meant to imply that we were unappreciative of the tremendous efforts which we know you are making to give us all we want and I hope you will not think it was. It is a word which has, I am afraid, become a piece of army jargon! On the contrary all of us, and no one more than I, realize fully what is being done for us and our only aim is to prove ourselves worthy of the aid we are receiving. . . .

I am most grateful to you for sending the whole of the 1st Armoured Division, which will be a magnificent reinforcement. I hope the leading brigade of it will be ready to take the field by the first half of November, and if the rest of it completes arrival by mid-November it should be ready to fight by mid-December, but not earlier I am afraid, as it must have some time to pull itself together after its long voyage and learn something of the local fighting conditions before it would be justifiable to throw it into battle.

Meanwhile the American tanks continue to arrive in a steady stream and are being put into the hands of the troops as quickly as they can be got ready.

The second brigade of the 7th Armoured Division is very nearly fully equipped now with these tanks and will shortly move forward to its allotted area.

As to the 250 Bofors guns which are on their way, we are eagerly awaiting their arrival. I can assure you that I am giving my closest personal attention to the need for having sufficient mobile guns to give proper protection to our troops taking part in the offensive. I have impressed this need many times on those concerned.

The submarines you have sent from the Atlantic will I know be most heartily welcomed by the Admiral and they should help tremendously in stopping the enemy's supplies.

Activity from Tobruk is continuous and I am constantly impressing on the Commander the need to keep the enemy busy. Although their efforts may seem small individually, they amount to a good deal in the aggregate and the losses inflicted on the enemy have been considerable. Any large-scale sorties from the fortress are difficult to stage owing to the peculiar conditions obtaining and, moreover, might give the enemy good opportunities for counter-attack which might result in a serious weakening of the defensive power of the garrison which, as I have explained, is small when related to the enormous length of the perimeter. Tobruk plays so large a part in our offensive plan that I do not wish to run too many risks of its being taken by the enemy. All the same the garrison will do what they can to intensify the efforts. . . .

Auchinleck wrote to Dill on the same day, and observed: 'I am sending a very full reply to the Prime Minister, explaining the general situation here. . . . I feel myself that the letter is much too long, but I know he won't read it if he doesn't want to. I would like you to read it if you can.' He continued:

The enemy in the Western Desert has shown much more activity lately and we have not yet fathomed what is behind it.

Perhaps Rommel has been stirred up by Hitler! Anyway yesterday he made a reconnaissance in considerable force with probably about 100 tanks and pushed on fast towards Sidi Barrani, which as you know is only covered by light motorized unarmoured forces and some armoured cars and artillery. These fell back according to plan and Beresford-Peirse made all arrangements to evacuate valuable stores and troops from Sidi Barrani, as we fully expected them to go for it today. It would have been a nuisance if they had taken it, as it would have delayed our programme and denied the landing grounds to our aircraft, which would have seriously affected our ability to give fighter cover to the shipping engaged in maintaining Tobruk.



I am glad to say that this morning he was on his way back whence he came under strong fighter cover. What his object was I don't know, but I do not think he found out much except that we had no tanks in that neighbourhood. We had already plans laid to move up a brigade of the 7th Armoured Division to protect our forces holding Sidi Barrani, and I hope that by this time next week we shall be in a position to see him off properly if he tries the same game again. There are also indications that he may be thinking of assaulting Tobruk, but we think that he would almost certainly try to eliminate Sidi Barrani first; hence a certain anxiety on my part over yesterday's excursion.

I think myself that it is quite likely he was bothered himself over the possibility of our attacking him, as we have been planting this idea on him quite successfully for some time. It will be interesting to see what happens next. . . .

Auchinleck's assessment of the motives underlying this reconnaissance in force which withered away with such rapidity was shrewdly near the mark. Although Rommel himself left no connected account of this period in the Desert campaign, General Fritz Bayerlein, who came to North Africa 'from the mud of the early Russian winter shortly before the beginning of the British autumn offensive',<sup>1</sup> built up long afterwards, from his own recollections and such documents as were available to him, a detailed picture of the situation as it looked from the Axis side. Rommel

. . . had failed, despite all efforts, to take Tobruk and thus acquire a supply port close to the front—for Benghazi was about three hundred miles away and Tripoli about a thousand. The British had been quick to appreciate the decisive importance of Tobruk and were defending it with the utmost tenacity. Important German and Italian forces were now tied up in the siege. But far worse was the fact that all future operations were bound to be determined by the situation at Tobruk. Were the enemy to launch simultaneous attacks from Egypt and Tobruk, Rommel's position could not fail to become extremely critical. The weak Axis forces had insufficient depth to allow them to operate freely; their supply lines were continually threatened, and a serious danger existed of their fighting units being squeezed into the confined space between the sea, the Sollum and the Tobruk fronts, and there surrounded and destroyed by a superior and skilfully led enemy.

Rommel was in no doubt that the British would exploit this

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 154.

opportunity towards the end of the year and that it was essential to forestall them by taking Tobruk before they had the chance. In any attack on Tobruk, however, he had to reckon with the possibility of a British relieving attack in the rear of his assault force; to meet it he would be forced to deploy the mass of his mobile forces between Capuzzo and Bir el Gubi. Rommel did not expect the British to launch a major attack until they thought the Middle East free of the danger of a German offensive through the Caucasus, when they would be able to draw off major forces for employment on the Egyptian front sufficient to ensure the success of their plan. With the adverse turn which our operations in Russia had taken, this situation could be expected to arise by about November.

During September the siege front round Tobruk was strengthened and suitable jump-off points for the attack were taken. The transportation across the Mediterranean of the necessary reinforcements, arms and supplies for the attack required a substantial increase in the level of Italian shipments to Africa. But these remained, as usual, far below the promises given us by the High Command, which had themselves been regarded as an absolute minimum. The result was that by the end of September only a third of the troops and a seventh of the supplies which we needed had arrived. This was a terrible handicap in our race for time with the British, and forced us to postpone our attack until November; even then we had to be content with inadequate forces and material. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The pressure of time and the inadequacies of both forces and material afflicted each of the opposing Commanders. Each reacted in accordance with his temperament.

On September 29 Cunningham, in accordance with the directive of September 2, submitted his appreciation and plan. Of the two courses outlined in the directive, Cunningham preferred the second with a slight variation. His attack, he proposed, would be made from the centre along the coast. Eighth Army's armoured forces would open the offensive by moving directly on Tobruk, followed by a completely motorized division. Rommel's two panzer divisions, which were believed to be lying between Bardia and Tobruk 'would then be drawn out and compelled to give battle away from their supporting fortresses and infantry formations'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 154-5.

<sup>2</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 24. General Cunningham's appreciation and plan are given in full in Appendix 2 of the Despatch, p. 65.

The estimate of the comparative numerical strengths of the British and the Axis armoured forces, made at the end of September, was not inaccurate. However, the assessment of the fighting value of the 138 tanks of the Italian Ariete Division as 'not very formidable', founded on the experience of the previous winter, proved to be, as Auchinleck admitted, 'somewhat erroneous'.

'The idea,' he continued, 'was that by moving wide we should force the enemy to come out and fight on ground not of his own choosing and away from his minefields and prepared defences round Sidi Omar and Capuzzo. We hoped that our numerical superiority in tanks would enable us to destroy his two Panzer divisions and open the way for the motorized divisions to force a passage to Tobruk. Meanwhile the 13th Corps comprising two infantry divisions with all the available infantry tanks were to contain the enemy in the frontier area. But they were not to expose themselves to attack by enemy tanks by moving forward into the no-man's-land between Tobruk and Bardia until this risk had been removed by the victory of our armoured forces.'<sup>1</sup>

Cunningham's appreciation stated that the object of the offensive was '*the destruction of the enemy armoured forces*'. This he intended to accomplish in the neighbourhood of Tobruk; Tobruk would be relieved, and General Scobie's forces in it would themselves sally out and take a vigorous, essential part in the defeat of the enemy and the clearing of Cyrenaica. Further plans for the capture of Benghazi depended on the success of this first part of the operation.

Cunningham's plan was the implementation of the current theory that armoured warfare was analagous to naval warfare. The desert was the ocean, and the tank was a landship. It subsequently became possible to argue that this analogy was followed too closely, and to point out the flaws in its reasoning; but nobody seriously questioned it in the late summer and early autumn of 1941. It was the doctrine expounded and practised by seasoned commanders in the field, no less than by those who, as Auchinleck had so emphatically desired, brought new ideas and a fresh outlook to desert warfare. It reigned supreme in Eighth Army headquarters and in G.H.Q.; and as Ismay's letter of August 28 reveals, it was held just as strongly by the chief military assistant and adviser to the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. What its validity was, as well as the enemy's reactions to it, the battle itself was to show.

On October 3 Auchinleck accepted and approved Cunningham's plan. 'Crusader' was on.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

## Intermission with Politicians—I

At this period Churchill was at the zenith of his authority. He towered over everybody. His political supremacy was, quite properly, unassailed. He had a parliamentary support never granted to Pitt; in the country, the Commonwealth and the world at large (most of which was either neutral or subjugated) his actions and his speeches were invested with an unimpeachable and glowing moral grandeur such as Lloyd George, with his tarnished reputation, his demagogic manoeuvres and his array of raffish or sinister hangers-on, neither merited nor attained.

Only in his capacity as Minister of Defence was he subject to opposition or criticism, his acceptance of which could be magnanimous and wise or—as mood and circumstances dictated—petulant, aggrieved or so wrathful that his judgment, both of men and of events, was impaired. The control which he claimed, and exercised, over all military operations, in their tactical execution as much as in their strategic policy and planning, was total; and British history supplies no parallel. But however great his military capacity, learning and experience, he was prone to both extravagance and error. His determination to maintain day-by-day, indeed minute-by-minute, military control, allied to his temperament, put his professional Service advisers and the commanders in the field in a moral dilemma of which, both at the time and in retrospect, he himself was unaware. They had constantly to ask themselves how far their professional judgment—not in their own interests, but for the sake of the country and the cause to whose service they were no less dedicated than he—should be opposed to his impetuosity, and at what point they must face the alternatives either of resigning or of complying with instructions which they believed to be dangerous, possibly disastrous.

Auchinleck in the period before 'Crusader' began was—as Dill had foreseen and warned him—especially vulnerable to Churchill's pressure. He was not a rebellious man, nor was he a conformist. The portrait of him painted by Churchill, in his own account of

their relationship, is designed to show him as rigid in his ideas and outlook, slow-moving and obstinate. This is manifestly unjust. Militarily, Auchinleck was quick, unorthodox and bold; he could apprehend a situation—and its complex implications—with speed and certainty, and act with decision and promptitude. He had a very high and subtle degree of intuition. Though he did not impose his will in a domineering manner, he had confidence in his own judgment. But he was sensitive and proud; suspicion and mistrust were to him wounds which a man of coarser fibre and vanity would have shrugged off. He was deeply conscious of the weight of the responsibility which he bore; he wished to discharge it in accordance with his own judgment.

This he was not granted. The Prime Minister involved himself up to the hilt in every stage and every phase of the preparations for 'Crusader'. It must be admitted, however, that this was, to no small extent, Auchinleck's own fault. He accepted the well-meant advice of his friend, Ismay, and unburdened himself freely to Churchill. By giving his confidence he invited—by implication—supervision and interference. Here he was less circumspect (in his own interest) than his predecessor had been. In the autumn of 1940 it was not until the planning of General O'Connor's desert advance had progressed very far that the Prime Minister was let into the secret; he could not exercise remote control, because he was told nothing.<sup>1</sup> Wavell's taciturnity was condoned, because it was followed by swift and large-scale victory at a time when it was desperately needed; but some months later, when difficulties, dangers and defeats abounded, it did not save him. Auchinleck almost from the outset told Churchill as much as he possibly could, and got himself into pickle after pickle.

A single adjective 'appreciable', could (as has been seen) have the most disturbing effect. As the weeks hurried by, and the letters and the telegrams flowed back and forth, Churchill got his teeth into 'Crusader'. His emotions and his opinions were not entirely consistent, and his interventions were incessant. Persistently mourning the 'delay', which he felt had been imposed upon him against his will, he not only assumed—so far as it was possible—the strategic control of the operation; he strove to assist it and expand it and to give detailed instructions about its conduct.

Before the completion of Auchinleck's visit to London Churchill set off to Placentia Bay in Newfoundland to meet President Roosevelt and to formulate the Atlantic Charter. Resting in his sea-cabin in H.M.S. *Prince of Wales* he 'brooded on the future battle in the

<sup>1</sup> See Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 441 and pp. 538-9.

Desert'.<sup>1</sup> The chief result of his meditations was a long memorandum, the first sentence of which, as he recorded, much pleased him: 'Renown awaits the Commander who first in this war restores artillery to its prime importance on the battlefield, from which it has been ousted by heavily armoured tanks.'<sup>2</sup>

Later, after the signing of the Charter and his return to London, the Prime Minister reverted to the possibilities of reinforcing the army in the Middle East. The trained troops now existed in England, but there was not the shipping to take them overseas. Confident of the cordiality of his relations with Roosevelt, the Prime Minister decided to ask his aid. The President's response was helpful and generous.

'I am sure,' he told Churchill on September 6, 'we can help with your project to reinforce the Middle East army. At any rate I can now assure you that we can provide transport for 20,000 men. . . . I am loaning you our best transport ships. Incidentally I am delighted you are going to reinforce the Middle East.'

The unfortunate impact of the word 'appreciable'—when Auchinleck apologized to Churchill for the distress which it caused, he was quite accurate in describing it as 'military jargon'—was one effect of this decision. The other was a discussion, conducted in a series of telegrams throughout much of September, about whether the reinforcements should be complete formations or drafts to make up existing formations; and Auchinleck and his staff preferred the latter alternative. So in fact did the C.I.G.S.; but Auchinleck took the burden of Churchill's displeasure, and earned himself a plaintive rebuke.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*10 September 1941*

1. At request of Prime Minister President Roosevelt has agreed to provide U.S. shipping necessary to transport 20,000 men from U.K. to Mideast. Together with shipping already at our disposal this will give shipping space to transport a maximum total of 95,000 men to Mideast between October 1 and December 31.

2. Our shipping commitments for Mideast are:

A. Army. To complete existing force (see para. 3) 74,530.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid Vol. III, p. 382.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.* p. 442 for complete text; it was circulated to the Secretary of State for War, the C.I.G.S., the V.C.I.G.S., the C-in-C. Middle East, and 'to all whom it may concern'. It went out finally on October 7, and Auchinleck received his copy on October 22. After he had received the comments of two R.A. brigadiers, Auchinleck annotated it, 'Keep as history!'

B. R.A.F. to raise and maintain 62½ squadrons, 23,000.

3. 74,000 made up as follows: Field and medium artillery 2,400; Anti-tank artillery 1,450; A.A. artillery 8,160; R.E. 5,010; Signals 2,500; R.A.S.C. 18,000; R.A.M.C. 2,000; R.A.O.C. 1,500; Miscellaneous 2,500. Drafts to complete war establishment 21,000. Drafts to cover estimated additional wastage 10,000.

4. In addition Defence Committee are considering proposals to send to Mideast an additional seventeen fighter squadrons, 12,000 men and two infantry divisions 40,000.

5. C.O.S. have agreed priority should be given to R.A.F. requirements for Mideast including [the above] seventeen squadrons. Therefore impossible to despatch both infantry divisions within capacity of shipping allotted to army in Mideast. C.O.S. request your views as to whether you would prefer one division should be despatched at expense of equivalent number of units and drafts in para. 3 or whether all available shipping should be used for units and drafts in para. 3 required for completion of existing force.

6. As President has been asked for shipping to send extra divisions to Mideast it may prove necessary politically to send at any rate one division.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*12 September 1941*

Before receiving your telegram of September 10 I had already answered cable from Prime Minister gladly accepting offer of two divisions concerning which we had had no prior information. Do not wish to appear in any way unappreciative this most generous offer but purely from point of view general efficiency of force for war I have no doubt that priority should be given to drafts and reinforcements for formations and units already here. Our requirements under this head are 74,000. As R.A.F. take up 35,000 out of 95,000 personnel for whom shipping is available, we can have 60,000. As stated above, if military reasons only are considered the whole 60,000 should be drafts and reinforcements unless we are to have to resort to expedients such as breaking up units or reducing composition of formations, both of which we are perforce already contemplating as Arthur Smith<sup>1</sup> will explain to you. If for political reasons it is essential to use American shipping for despatch of intact formations we would of course welcome one division plus 40,000 drafts and reinforcements but this course

<sup>1</sup> Gen. Smith was on his way to London to give the C.O.S. and the War Cabinet the latest information about progress towards 'Crusader'. Gen. Shearer had not yet reached Cairo on his return journey.

would actually result in aggravating our manpower situation. Another reason in present circumstances against adding complete formations here is that they necessitate increases in rearward establishments and services which are already below those required for the forces now here. Very grateful if you will explain whole situation to Prime Minister.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*17 September 1941*

... President Roosevelt has made a very fine proposal to send six of his finest fast American transports to make one trip or perhaps two between Britain and the Middle East. Apart from actual help in transportation, the arrival of these ships, manned by United States of America personnel and flying the American flag through U-boat zone and in British harbours, is another important forward step towards full American action.

I was therefore very much disturbed to receive your telegram making little of the arrival of these divisions and preferring a mass of details and drafts. I cannot approach the President once again upon so complete a change in what I proposed to him. One division must go at once in American transports; I hope also to send the other division in British transports. It may be necessary, however, to relegate this other division to the second trip.

I cannot agree to assigning highest priority to 35,000 more airmen for Middle East. This would mean 80,000 to 85,000 air personnel to keep only a maximum of eighty squadrons on active operations, or 1,000 ground men to every squadron of sixteen aircraft in action. The Air Ministry have [been] requested to revise their immediate demands.

I have studied attentively your field states and was relieved to see that your sixty infantry battalions average 880 and your forty-five regiments of artillery are only on the average nine per cent below strength. It is impossible to imagine a situation in the next four months when you will be using any great mass of artillery in continuous bombardment. Therefore I cannot feel that artillery drafts should have a high priority. Infantry drafts are good whenever they can come but they must yield priority at present time. I hope to send you 20,000. High priorities will be given to six tank transporter companies and sixteen standard M.T. companies, and to various specialist units of R.A.S.C. . . . In the meantime no cadres are to be destroyed without previous sanction from here. You should notify us of any which have fallen exceptionally low. All deficiencies can be made good early next year. The immediate problem is one of priorities. We are not



making an army to conform to conventional establishments but to achieve definite tactical, strategical and political objectives. Improvisation cannot be excluded from the duties of military and air staffs. . . .

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*21 September 1941*

. . . I welcome the prospect of two more fine British divisions fully trained and equipped.

It was my duty to point out that my most urgent need now is for reinforcements to bring the formations already here up to strength. Our administrative services are already strained, especially Signals and R.A.S.C. Hospital capacity is below normal. Additional divisions will make this side of my problem more difficult. . . .

We can and will fight despite . . . shortages, but we have no adequate reserve of men to replace wastage and battle casualties.

No cadres have been destroyed. I will of course obtain prior approval for any such proposals. I am fully alive to the need for improvisation and the danger of adhering rigidly to uniform and stereotyped formations and establishments. . . .

I am determined to launch the offensive at the earliest possible moment, for delay is likely to weight the scales against us. The first requisite for success is the establishment of reasonable air superiority and this, unless we are relatively in overwhelming strength in the air, can be achieved only by wearing down the enemy's air forces over a considerable period prior to the launching of the main land offensive. So far as our contemplated operations are concerned, this period unfortunately coincides with the operations for the relief of the Tobruk garrison which Tedder agrees cannot but force us to divert many aircraft from the main air effort to cover the shipping carrying the troops. I still hope that the effect of this may not be such as seriously to prejudice the gaining of air superiority, but until we can see how the situation develops it would be wrong for me to tell you that we may not perforce have to delay the offensive.

This spasm of controversy between Cairo and London ended. On September 26 Eighth Army was formally constituted, and this title replaced the older 'Western Desert Force' and Churchill's sonorous 'Army of the Nile'. Eighth Army was to pass through vicissitudes and win a fame rare in military history. For several weeks planning and preparation went on steadily. The Prime Minister's attention was not focused solely on the Western Desert.

In the earlier part of October he was eagerly putting forward a project for the capture and retention of Trondheim.<sup>1</sup>

On October 9 two War Office Generals, Kennedy, the D.M.O., and Davidson, the D.M.I., lunched with Churchill at Number Ten Downing Street. In an expansive, conversational mood he 'raised the subject of Libya. He said it would be a wonderful thing, and far-reaching, if we could smash the Afrika Korps. He hoped we might get our attack in before the Germans could be strongly reinforced, and while they were still weak from the effects of their long sojourn in the Desert, but he was afraid that we might miss our opportunity.'<sup>2</sup>

Once again irregularity and delays in communication—other than by telegram—played their unfortunate but familiar parts. Arthur Smith on his way back from London was held up in Gibraltar and (as Auchinleck told the Prime Minister) 'nearly drowned into the bargain'. On September 29 Auchinleck wrote to Churchill one of his secret and personal letters which was intended to be despatched that night. The aircraft in which it was carried did not leave Alexandria until October 7.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

29 September 1941

... Three days ago I spent a morning in the desert outside Cairo with the 4th Armoured Brigade and watched them manoeuvring in their new American tanks and shooting from them. There is no doubt that they are excellent machines, very handy and easily manoeuvrable and fast. Our officers are delighted with their reliability and endurance when compared with our own tanks, and are frankly amazed at the length of time they can be kept in work without having to go into the shops to be overhauled. We have had to make a good many minor alterations and adjustments to make these tanks 'battleworthy', such as fitting wireless sets, drinking water tanks etc., but these have not caused any appreciable delay in their issue to the troops, as many of the alterations can be and are carried out in an hour or two by the unit itself. The 8th Hussars were making excellent shooting when I was watching them and we have been able to make them a good allotment of practice ammunition, I am glad to say. Confidence in their ability to hit the enemy tanks is more than half the battle I feel. . . .

<sup>1</sup> For a full account of this proposal and its fate see *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, pp. 258-62, and *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, pp. 169-70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 167.

I have impressed your views on the handling of artillery and its use against tanks, as well as against the air, and also on the methods to be adopted to ensure proper co-operation between the Army and the Air Force, on my commanders and senior staff officers and will see that they are adhered to. I am doing all I can to give Cunningham a generous quota of mobile anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery and I am pleased with the results—so I think is he. He is getting as much field artillery as he can handle and maintain and if he asks for more, he shall have it. This allotment of artillery entails a weakening for the time being of formations in Egypt and Syria, but this is a justifiable risk in the circumstances and one which I have no hesitation in taking. . . .

The enemy in Cyrenaica is quiescent at the moment and has not lately given any indications of his future intentions. We are keeping a close eye on his doings as his dispositions must materially affect our detailed plans for the offensive. I am satisfied that our Intelligence service is good; generally speaking their forecasts are proving remarkably correct.

The building up of reserves in our forward areas goes on steadily and, as I told you in my last letter, our troops westward of Sidi Barrani are being continuously strengthened in order to protect these forward dumps and our advanced landing grounds in the same area against any sudden attack by the enemy, who may be tempted to raid them.

Our 'Long Range Desert Group' patrols have been working very far afield and have been bringing in valuable information concerning movement on the enemy lines of communication leading back from Benghazi to Tripoli. This information provides a good check on that received from other sources. As you know good information is everything in a situation like the present. . . .

Auchinleck did not write again, in the same candid and informative strain, until October 11. Meanwhile he had been off on a tour of Syria and Palestine, and Oliver Lyttelton, the Minister of State, had paid a brief visit to the United Kingdom. What Auchinleck was unable to predict was the mood of the Prime Minister when he received these careful communications.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*11 October 1941*

. . . Since the first broad plans for an offensive in Cyrenaica were conceived some three months ago, the situation has undoubtedly altered somewhat. The enemy has been able to build up a certain reserve of supplies in Cyrenaica, though he is still short

of petrol, we think, and likely to remain so, we hope. He has also reorganized his divisions and relieved the personnel of one of them by fresh men from Germany. He has brought over another Italian motorized division and some, if not all, of the battalions of a German 'positional' division. We believe that these formations and units suffered quite considerable losses in transit through our attacks on the transports conveying them to Libya. We do not think he has been able appreciably to increase his strength in tanks or in artillery, though we have reason to believe that he is trying to reinforce his artillery in Libya. All these things you foresaw and foretold and we have always taken account of them in our calculations. I think that, in view of the relative tank strengths of ourselves and the enemy, the delay which enabled him thus to improve his position during the last three months was inevitable.

As you already know, I think, it is only now that the second of the two tank brigades of the 7th Armoured Division has reached a standard of equipment and training justifying its being sent to the Front, where it will still require some further training in desert fighting on the spot. . . .

Our recent reinforcement of our forward troops in the Western Desert should now make it very difficult for the enemy to try to overrun Sidi Barrani and our advanced aerodromes without provoking a major engagement. Should he make the attempt, we ought to be able to inflict very heavy, and perhaps decisive losses on him, as we shall be fighting him on our own ground. For these reasons it might very well be the best thing that could happen, as we ought to be able to take full advantage of any such reverse as we might be able to inflict on him in these circumstances.

There have been signs of renewed activity on the part of the enemy these last two or three days, and we have information that he may be contemplating an offensive on about the 15th of the month. On the other hand we have reasonably reliable evidence that he is expecting us to attack him about the same date. This expectation is probably a result of our cover plan, but it is possible that he may have in mind the launching of a 'preventive' offensive so as to disorganize any offensive plans *we* may have! In any event I am not allowing these possibilities to interfere with our preparations which are going forward according to plan.

I got back to Cairo last night and was told on arrival that the cruiser tanks which came out with the last brigade to arrive have not been 'tropicalized' or modified for this theatre. We had hoped that it would have been possible to do this before they left England, but we must now do it here. We are using all available resources

for the purpose, but the work cannot be completed much before the end of October, I am afraid, as there is a limit to the number of men who can be set to work on one tank at the same time. I assure you, however, that no effort shall be spared to expedite the work. Meanwhile the officers and men will be familiarizing themselves with the Desert and training as best they can. When the modifications are complete, the commander must be given an opportunity to handle his units in the desert before being put into battle. . . .

The Minister of State has come back and I, for one, am very glad to see him again, for he is a tremendous help to us here. He has told us something of what he learned in England and of your urgent desire to expedite action against the enemy in Libya. You know I am fully cognizant of the need for speed and no one could be more anxious than I am to attack at the earliest possible moment. I have been working to no other end for the last three months. All the same, unless the enemy plays into our hands by seeking battle himself in the meantime, I can hold out no hope of being able to mount a decisive offensive before the beginning of November, but I do hope to be able to act soon after that. I ask you to believe me when I say that I am not waiting for every gaiter to be buttoned.

On the contrary, I am cutting every margin, and there are many of them to be considered, as close as I dare, and I can assure you that some of them are very fine indeed. For instance, in the matter of ammunition for the American tanks to which I have already referred, our reserves amount to no more than could be easily fired off in one good day's battle. Then again, our reserves of tanks to take the place of those damaged or destroyed in action are not nearly up to the minimum scale necessary as yet, and I am relying on the arrival of tanks from overseas to make good this very serious discrepancy. Please do not think I am complaining. I know the efforts you have made and are making to give us what we need, and I know how great is our debt to you. I give you these examples only to show you that there are many factors which have to be weighed and considered before a decision as to the date on which an offensive could be launched with a reasonable chance of success can be made. As you know well, it is not only the first clash for which plans have to be made. If we are to give you a prize worthy of all the efforts you have made to supply us, the momentum of the offensive must be maintained, and to this end large reserves of transport, ammunition and supplies of all sorts must be prepared and held in the right places. . . .

Churchill was looking far ahead of the first clash. His hopes were that there would be a decisive victory in the Western Desert, driving Rommel back through Libya and Tripolitania. If all went well, he mused, 'this might bring the rallying from Vichy of Tunis, Algeria and Morocco, and perhaps even the accession of Vichy itself. This purpose was only a hope built on a hope. . . . If we got Tripoli, and France would not move, our possession of Malta would enable us to descend upon Sicily. . . . Once Rommel was beaten and his small, audacious army destroyed and Tripoli was ours it was not thought impossible for four divisions of our best troops, about 80,000 men, to land and conquer Sicily.'<sup>1</sup>

The human dynamo was in full working order once more. On the evening of October 14 the V.C.I.G.S., General Pownall, and Generals Kennedy and Davidson were summoned to the Cabinet Room, to discuss 'Crusader'. The Prime Minister wanted his ranging speculations embodied in an outline plan in time for a meeting of the Defence Committee on the following evening. As the Generals were about to depart, to address themselves and their subordinates to this task, the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal (later Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord) Portal, entered the room and 'read out a telegram from Tedder, the Commander of the Air Force in Egypt, to the effect that Auchinleck would not have air superiority in the coming battle. Churchill signified his disapproval, but Portal quickly read out his reply, in which he had told Tedder that he was wrong and pessimistic and that he must think again. The Prime Minister said that Portal's reply was excellent.'<sup>2</sup>

The matter, however, was not left there. Shortly after midnight Churchill signalled to Auchinleck:

In view of extreme differences in estimates of enemy numbers and strength which are apparent between Air Staff here and Tedder and his Air Intelligence, and vital need to find truth, I consulted my War Cabinet colleagues in Defence Committee and we decided to send forthwith Air Chief Marshal Freeman who is a friend of Tedder's to Cairo.

Freeman, who is in closest agreement with C.A.S., will go into whole question and report to me. He will also give you his appreciation relative strengths and of any further measures which can be taken by Air Force to support your operations.

And on October 16 this preliminary thunderbolt was followed

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. III, p. 479.

<sup>2</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 173.

by another, in the form of a letter, which reached Auchinleck four days later.

My dear General Auchinleck,

Tedder's estimate of strength, actual and relative, is so misleading and militarily untrue that I found it necessary at once to send Air Chief Marshal Freeman to Cairo. Only in this way can the facts be established, we here be properly informed and you yourself reassured as to the Air strength at your disposal. The Air Staff here know just as much and in some ways more than the Air Intelligence in Egypt. Their conviction is that you will have a substantial numerical superiority in the battle zone, even if all Italian planes are counted as if they were equal to German or British. Moreover, Tedder's telegram assumed, on the basis of an estimate of September 7, that the Russian front would be stabilized by October 15, thus permitting reinforcement to begin. It will certainly not be stabilized for some weeks, if then, and thereafter several more weeks must elapse before any effective transference can be made of German Air units already battered and worn.

I thought it very wrong that such mis-statements should be made by the Air authorities in Cairo on the eve of a decisive battle, and I shall not conceal from you that such conduct has affected my confidence in their quality and judgment.

You will find Freeman an officer of altogether larger calibre, and if you feel he would be a greater help to you and that you would have more confidence in the Air Command if he assumed it, you should not hesitate to tell me so. The time has now come when for the purposes of the major operation impending, the Air is subordinated to you. Do not let any thought of Tedder's personal feelings influence you. This is no time for such considerations. On the other hand I am very glad to see that you and Tedder are in accord upon the tactical employment of the Air Force and that there is no danger of its being parcelled out among the various divisions, thus losing its power to make the characteristic contribution of its arm.

I am very glad you are sending an officer home to tell me and the C.I.G.S. something more of your plans. Upon 'Crusader' and the use made of it, issues affecting the whole immediate future of the war depend. Turkey, French North Africa and Spain will pick their steps accordingly. The struggling Russian armies will feel that our long period of inaction has been at last broken and that they are not the only people engaging the enemy. Feeling

here has risen very high against what is thought to be our supine incapacity for action. I am however fully in control of public opinion and the House of Commons. Nevertheless it seems to me, on military grounds alone, that everything should be thrown into this battle that can be made to play its part. This is also the view of the Defence Committee, both political and expert Members. God has granted us this long breathing space and I feel sure that if all is risked all may be won.

We have been considering how to help you exploit success, should it be granted to us. Any long delay after a victory in Cyrenaica in pushing on to Tripoli would seem fatal to that extension of your plan. It is rather a rapid dash forward, while the shock of the battle still reigns and before the enemy can bring new forces into Africa or into Italy, that seems alone possible. Directions have been given here to prepare an expedition to Norway, and shipping for about four divisions, including one armoured division, is being gathered. Winter clothing is being issued to the troops assigned. This forms a real cover. However, from about the middle of November or perhaps even a little earlier I shall be holding a substantial force which can as easily steer south as north. Should your operation change the attitude of Weygand we could enter by Casablanca at his invitation; or alternatively action against Sicily in conjunction with your army may be taken. This last plan is now being studied by the Chiefs of Staff and the Defence Committee. The situation in Italy, and particularly in Sicily, gives grounds for hope and audacity on our part. On this you will presently receive details.

This letter is evidently most private and secret, but I should be glad if you would show it to the Minister of State to whom I have not had time to write separately.

With every good wish,

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

WINSTON S. CHURCHILL

P.S. I sent your account of the American light cruiser tanks exercising to the President and Mr. Harriman yesterday.

This was indeed, in General Kennedy's words, 'a difficult and irritating phase'. On the evening of October 15 Auchinleck sent a telegram to the Prime Minister thanking him for his help over the whole troublesome matter of the removal of the Australians from Tobruk; he mentioned that the first half of the operation (of withdrawal and replacement by sea) was now in progress, and added a



sentence which had an incandescent effect on the recipient: 'Execution second half "Cultivator"<sup>1</sup> would not of itself retard "Crusader" as date for this now depends on other factors.' This effect was little diminished by the telegram's final words: 'Hope to send home shortly responsible staff officer to give you and C.I.G.S. details of "Crusader".'

In the small hours of October 17 a 'Most Immediate, Clear the Line' reply was despatched to the C-in-C.:

... I am disquietened by your phrase that retardation 'of date "Crusader" now depends on other factors'. I have never so far heard of any of these other factors or any whisper of retardation. On the contrary I was encouraged by Shearer to hope for an earlier date. I hope you will be able to reassure me at once.

I am looking forward to arrival your staff officer.

I am sending a letter by Freeman who should be with you on Sunday morning.

Auchinleck answered at once:

Hope to despatch Whiteley, my D.D.O., by fast air service tomorrow with details and forecast dates 'Crusader'. Date is later than that mentioned by you to Minister of State but earlier than that which seemed possible when total relief Tobruk garrison had first to be planned. I hope this will reassure you.

Churchill has said that he was 'vexed' by this telegram. He expressed himself forcibly.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*18 October 1941*

Your telegram confirms my apprehensions. Date was mentioned by you to Defence Committee and though we felt the delay most dangerous we accepted it and have worked towards it in our general plans. It is impossible to explain to Parliament and nation how it is our Mideast armies have had to stand for 4½ months without engaging enemy whilst all time Russia is being battered to pieces. I have hitherto managed to prevent public discussion but at any time it may break out. Moreover the few precious weeks that remain to us for exploitation of any success are passing. No warning has been given to me of your further delay and no reasons. Your D.D.O. may easily take a week on homeward journey. I must be able to inform War Cabinet on Monday number of days further delay you now demand.

Moreover the Lord Privy Seal leaves Monday for U.S.A. carrying with him a personal letter to the President which I did not

<sup>1</sup> 'Cultivator' was the code-name for the evacuation of the Australians.

wish to entrust to Strips or Cipher Department. In this letter, which would be handed to the President for his eyes alone and to be burnt or returned thereafter, I was proposing to state that in moonlight of early November you intended to attack. It is necessary for me to take the President into our confidence and thus stimulate his friendly action. In view of plan we are preparing for 'Whipcord'<sup>1</sup> I am in this letter asking him to send three or four U.S. divisions to relieve our troops in Northern Ireland as a greater safeguard against invasion in spring. I fixed date of the Lord Privy Seal's mission in relation to date you had given us. Of course if it is only a matter of two or three days the fact could be endured. It is not however possible for me to concert the general movement of the war if important changes are made in plans agreed upon without warning or reason. Pray therefore telegraph in time.

Show this to Minister of State.

This telegram went out at 8.50 p.m. on October 18; earlier on that same day Auchinleck had written to the Prime Minister a letter which was to be taken by Brigadier Whiteley, 'whose business [Auchinleck said] it is to know every detail connected with the coming operations in the Western Desert and, indeed, with all operations present or projected in this theatre of war. He has my entire confidence and is completely in my mind.' He went on:

I mentioned in my last letter to you that the cruiser tanks of the 22nd Armoured Brigade arrived here without having been modified for the desert and that we were devoting all our energies to effect this essential work in the shortest possible time. This work is going on very well indeed and at a speed which much exceeds what I had dared to hope for in the first instance. I was at Alexandria two days ago and watched this work in progress in the big Ordnance workshops there and was very satisfied with what I saw. It is now as certain as anything can be certain in the circumstances existing in a theatre of war, that the regiments of this brigade will have all received their tanks back, modified for desert fighting, by the end of this month. Each regiment in turn as it receives its full complement of tanks will move to its concentration area behind our advanced troops in the Desert, and will start training intensively in desert movement and desert

<sup>1</sup> At Churchill's instigation, plans were being prepared by the C.O.S. for the exploitation of 'Crusader' by an advance into Tripolitania, under the code-name 'Acrobat', and immediately thereafter for an attack on Sicily, under the code-name 'Whipcord'.

fighting, which differ somewhat from the same activities as practised on Salisbury Plain. Once concentrated, the brigadier must be given an opportunity to handle and command his brigade in the Desert. I have considered this question most carefully, always bearing in mind the urgent need for haste, and I have decided that November 15 is the earliest date on which the brigade can be put into battle. All my advisers, including General Cunningham and the higher commanders concerned, agree with me on this point. Even so, this is running things pretty fine when the fact that it is three months since the brigade functioned as a unit is taken into consideration, apart from the difference in tactical technique imposed by desert conditions.

I had originally hoped to have been able to start our attack during the first two or three days of November, had this 22nd Armoured Brigade arrived in this country about the middle of September as then seemed possible. As a matter of fact, it did not, as you know, complete disembarkation of its personnel till October 4 while the last of its tanks did not come off the ship till October 14, nearly a month later. I think therefore that on the whole our forecasts, given to you more than two months ago, were remarkably accurate—more so than is usually the case in war.

I know how anxious you are for us to strike, and I and Tedder and all of us are just as anxious. At the moment the 15th looks as if it should be a firm date, that is to say if the enemy does not radically alter his dispositions meanwhile. . . .

Churchill's telegram was received at G.H.Q. a few minutes after midnight on October 18-19. It evoked from Auchinleck the clearest, strongest reply that he had yet given to the Prime Minister's questions and strictures. He spent most of the day drafting it.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

19 October 1941

1. Brigadier Whiteley left last night but as you say may be delayed *en route*.
2. I cannot accept that any important changes have been made in plans agreed upon without warning or reason.
3. In my telegram of July 23<sup>1</sup> I said the date might be advanced to November 1 on the clear condition that 150 tanks and personnel from U.K. would arrive here September 13-20.
4. On the same clear condition:
  - (a) At 270th meeting of C.O.S. Committee held on July 31 (*vide* item 3 of minutes) I said I hoped date would be November 1.

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 264-5 above.

(b) At a subsequent meeting of Defence Committee of Cabinet I said it would take at least a month for the armoured brigade from U.K. to be fit for action after its arrival in Middle East and that November 1 was earliest date possible.

5. Tanks and personnel did not however arrive till October 4-14, that is about three weeks later than date on which calculations made for paras 3 and 4 (a) and (b) above.

6. Further (*vide* my letters of October 11 and 18) all the tanks on arrival had to be modified here to fit them for desert. This process entails stripping each tank and the whole will occupy three weeks.

7. In my telegram of July 23 I also said that two or preferably three armoured divisions would be necessary to retake the whole of Cyrenaica. I am now going to attempt this with one and a half armoured divisions.

8. I submit that I have not diverged from any undertaking or forecast given to you or Chiefs of Staff but that our appreciation of situation made three months ago has proved remarkably accurate.

9. I assure you that everyone here is putting out the maximum effort to prevent any avoidable delay and date will be communicated in my immediately following telegram. I earnestly request that this date may not be given to anyone except personally to Chiefs of Staff.

10. I view with great apprehension any suggestion that dates and details of projected operations here should be given to anyone else. Preservation of secrecy is absolutely vital.

11. Minister of State has seen this telegram.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*21 October 1941*

1. We have no choice but to accept your new proposal. I will not therefore waste further words upon it.

2. Your para. 5. The War Office Movement Branch state the three M.T. ships and two out of three personnel ships arrived on October 2 and remaining personnel ship two days later. We do not understand why when every day was of measureless consequence it took nearly a fortnight to unload these 150 vehicles from three separate ships.

3. Your para. 6 raises technical issue upon which War Office are telegraphing separately.

4. Your para. 7. It seems misleading to calculate in divisions when ours are wholly different from those of enemy. . . .

5. Your paras. 9 and 10. Your new date has been withheld

from Defence Committee. It was never intended that dates or details should be given even to President and phrase I am now using is 'some time during the fall'.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the Prime Minister's attack on Tedder had to be countered. Auchinleck acted without hesitation. On October 21 he signalled the Prime Minister: 'I have full confidence in Tedder and earnestly request you not to consider any change at the present time.' He followed this telegram with a letter setting out his views in more detail and dealing, as carefully and tactfully as possible, with the new plans and projects which were being put to him.<sup>2</sup>

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

23 October 1941

I am not and have not been unduly anxious about the Air situation in spite of the way in which the relative strength of ourselves and the enemy may have been displayed from time to time. Unless there is a tremendous disparity one way or another, which does not seem likely in this particular case, I feel that the gaining of a reasonable degree of superiority, which I feel is the most one can legitimately expect in the circumstances, is more a matter of leadership, skill and general efficiency than of numbers.

I have confidence in the ability of Tedder and his subordinate commanders to do what we require of them and I am glad to be able to think that the confidence of the Army generally in the R.A.F. in this theatre, which was somewhat shaken after the campaigns in Greece and Crete, is now restored. The co-operation between the two Services is very good and I hope that they understand each other's capabilities and limitations much better than has sometimes been the case in the past.

As regards estimates of opposing strengths, I feel that one must

<sup>1</sup> The final paragraph of this telegram must be considered in conjunction with the text of the letter which Mr. Attlee (then Lord Privy Seal) took with him to Mr. Roosevelt; it is printed in full in Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. III, p. 482. It begins: 'Some time this fall General Auchinleck will attack the German and Italian armies in Cyrenaica with his utmost available power.' There is a footnote to this sentence which reads: 'The actual date and the code-name "Crusader" were given in a separate note.'

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 173: 'The Prime Minister's reaction [to the postponement of "Crusader"] was to turn frantically to all kinds of other possibilities for offensive action. Whenever an idea, however wild, was thrown up, he ordered detailed examinations or plans, or both, to be made at high speed. . . . To cope with the situation adequately, it would almost have been worth while to have two staffs: one to deal with the Prime Minister, the other with the war.'

always consider the worst possible case and state it, though one need not necessarily be overawed by it when making plans for future operations. Figures can be made to prove anything, but I do not think we have allowed ourselves to be governed by them. . . .

Air Chief Marshal Freeman's visit has been of the greatest value to us, especially in connexion with 'Whipcord'. I will not conceal from you that I view this project with a certain amount of misgiving, because of the timing of it. I would feel much happier if I knew that I could complete the task you have given me first, before having to divert energy and resources in another direction.

I fully realize the need for speed in this new project and the magnitude of the prize to be gained, should it be successful. Nevertheless, an operation of this kind demands the most careful planning and preparation and the possession of really accurate information.

So far as we are concerned, I shall find great difficulty in finding sufficient troops adequately trained for the purpose. As you know I have devoted all my available resources in men and weapons to give Cunningham all he wants for 'Crusader' and I have little left except the Australians who cannot be made available, even if they were trained for the business, which they are not. I am not making difficulties, but you know I have stripped everything else for 'Crusader' and to provide a division without weakening 'Crusader' is going to be a tricky problem. The use of troops without special training for an operation of this kind is, in my opinion, out of the question. A brigade is just starting training at our instructional establishment. The course lasts from two to three weeks, and there is only sufficient equipment to train one brigade at a time. Other brigades have been through this course before but they are now irretrievably committed elsewhere and cannot be extricated without seriously dislocating 'Crusader'.

With regard to the sequel to 'Crusader', now called 'Acrobat', I fully realize the need for speed and the avoidance of delay, and I assure you again that there will be no avoidable delay. All the same, no advance can take place until adequate supplies of petrol, ammunition and other supplies can be accumulated and carried forward, and this must take time. The distances to be covered are great and the means of transportation scanty. General Cunningham and all others concerned have been firmly impressed with the imperative necessity for haste and for improvisation to overcome the very real difficulties of maintenance. . . .

'Whipcord' rather than 'Acrobat' was, for several days, the main focus of attention. The Commanders-in-Chief in the Middle East telegraphed their agreed views on it; Auchinleck supplemented the signal—and his letter to Churchill—with a concise assessment to Dill:

... I am of opinion that the conception of this operation is sound and the advantages likely to accrue from its successful execution are great. I do not, however, agree that the conditions laid down as requisite for its success are in any way likely to be fulfilled before the date suggested for its execution. Moreover I consider that it would be wrong to attempt this operation before we have cleared the enemy out of North Africa and stabilized the situation in Anatolia and the Caucasus. I consider these objects vital to the future successful prosecution of the war and that any diversion of effort from them would be most unsound. Once these objects have been achieved we may be able to consider the undertaking of an offensive against the enemy in Europe, but even then not until he is so seriously embarrassed and committed elsewhere as to make it impossible for him to use his interior lines to concentrate greatly superior forces, and especially air forces, against our attack.

We are now at last coming within sight of the time when we may expect to have air and land forces of a quality and quantity which hold out a reasonable hope of our being able to strike a really hard blow at some vital but weak joint in the enemy's armour, but these forces are not yet ready neither can we be sure that our bases in the Middle East are reasonably secure from enemy attack. The strategic situation in this theatre must, I feel, be viewed as a whole and a premature offensive in Sicily is sure to affect adversely not only North Africa but also the entire Asian front. I consider therefore that to attempt this operation in the immediate future would be strategically most unwise and likely to undo the steady progress recently made towards the building up of forces adequate for the carrying out of long term plans scientifically conceived.

At their end the Chiefs of Staff were no less anxious about 'Whipcord' than Auchinleck in Cairo. Brigadier Whiteley, escaping the delays which the Prime Minister had so mournfully prophesied, reached London on the morning of October 22. He saw General Kennedy at once, and told him that Auchinleck's opinion was that Sicily would be ripe for attack in the summer of 1942, and that his order of priorities was (1) Tripoli, (2) Turkey and the Caucasus and

(3) Sicily. 'This,' said Kennedy, 'coincided with our own ideas.'<sup>1</sup> These ideas were difficult to impress upon the Prime Minister, in whose vivid and dramatic imaginings Sicily was as good as taken. General Alexander, who was now high in favour, had indeed been summoned to London to be told that he would command the operation. For a week the controversy raged, in and out of the highest staff circles, and in the Defence Committee of the Cabinet itself. On October 28, however, Dill told Kennedy that 'Whipcord' was dead, and that 'the Navy had killed it in the end. The Prime Minister, Dill said, had been very disgruntled and had said that he now intended, for a change, to criticize the proposals of the Chiefs of Staff.'<sup>2</sup> Churchill has said that it was the Middle East commanders' telegram, whose arguments were strongly supported by General Wavell in India, which induced him to give up the idea of 'Whipcord'.

*Prime Minister to General Ismay for C.O.S. Committee 28 October 1941*

In view of the latest Middle East telegram and of your own decisive abandonment of the project 'Whipcord', which you advocated and I espoused, I now consider that plan at an end. . . .<sup>3</sup>

However, as General Kennedy made clear, Churchill's energy and ingenuity were nowhere near exhausted. His next project (adumbrated at length in the minute to General Ismay quoted above) was a swift seizure, with American support, of French North Africa; it bore the code-name 'Gymnast', and the Prime Minister turned to it with resilience and unflagging enthusiasm. He envisaged the clearance of Cyrenaica by the defeat of Rommel; the advance to Tripoli; and, with the invitation and help of the French (if that were forthcoming), the entry into French North-West Africa. The Sicily assault (which he never really banished from his mind) depended upon the favourable outcome of the first two, and was an alternative to the third.

Strategically the plan, in that sequence, was sound. A year later it was in fact executed. But in 1941 it was logistically impossible. This was the factor which Churchill was determined to overlook. Morally, his attitude could be immensely stimulating. Practically, it presented certain difficulties.

\* \* \*

And then, for the time being, the tempest blew itself out, though it left its consequences which were neither forgotten nor forgiven.

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 489.



Though it was unrecognized by either of them at the time, this was a major crisis in Churchill's relations with Auchinleck. The root of the lack of understanding between these two men, both so estimable, so courageous and so patriotic, lay in the fact that Churchill, despite his beginnings as a soldier, despite his experiences as a battalion commander in the First World War, and despite his profound and protracted study of the art of war in all its aspects, remained at heart a civilian—a writer and a politician. This in many aspects of his career was both to his advantage and to his credit. The British people, even at the height of the conflict, would never have conceded to a military leader the authority which Churchill exercised as a civilian Prime Minister. Popular memory, longer and more stubborn than the critics of Parliamentary democracy are willing to admit, had not forgotten Cromwell and the major-generals. Of this Churchill, the Parliamentarian, was perfectly aware. But he brought his civilian, Parliamentary manners—if not his outlook—into his relations with senior professional officers to whom they were bewildering, if not acutely distasteful. From his first, impressionable days in the House of Commons Churchill had matured in an atmosphere in which it is taken for granted that one Member may, within the limits of courtesy and veracity laid down by the Speaker, abuse another with unrelenting ferocity on the floor of the House and then—his speech ended—walk out arm in arm with his opponent to a drink in the smoking room or the bar. To all soldiers, as to many Civil Servants, this is incomprehensible; they are unaccustomed to being abused to their faces by their superiors, or to blackguarding their equals in public.

The harsh and cutting phrases which Churchill in his hastier moments telegraphed to Auchinleck, and to other commanders in the field, were to him no more and no less than the cut and thrust of debate, and he genuinely could not understand that those at whom they were directed could be wounded by them. This, however, was not all. In his own complicated character there were reserves of memory, both about emotions and about facts, which could—long after any actual exchange of argument—materially influence even his most considered judgment.

Brigadier Whiteley returned to Cairo on the evening of November 5. Like General Shearer a couple of months earlier, he brought with him some important letters for the Commander-in-Chief.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*25 October 1941*

... I fancy that from Oliver Lyttelton and others you have a fair idea of the atmosphere here and that therefore you are not

unduly exasperated by some of the telegrams which the P.M. shoots at you from time to time. But the P.M. has troubles and anxieties about which you may not know and bearing all these in mind, he is wonderful.

His first serious difficulty is the clamour, which grows, that we should do something more for Russia. If this clamour were confined to the very ignorant and the yellow press it would not greatly matter. But it comes from people who ought to know better. First of all there is of course the urge from Stalin himself and the tone of the Ambassador's telegrams leave little doubt that he, the Ambassador, thinks we might do better.

Then of course there is the Press with people like John Gordon in the *Evening Standard*—or is it the *Sunday Express*?—shouting loudly that the 'Brass Hats' have no imagination and so on. As I motored through London yesterday I saw placards on the hoardings and walls saying 'Russia's crisis is Britain's danger. Attack in the West now.'

What, however, is more dangerous than all this clamour is that, within the Cabinet, Beaverbrook is of the same way of thinking. He has heard all the arguments from the Chiefs of Staff against these wild ideas but refuses to believe them—or pretends to—and I am not at all sure that Beaverbrook will not stage a resignation on the grounds that he cannot continue to be a member of a Government which has so signally failed to help Russia. . . .

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

30 October 1941

Brigadier Whiteley has been a great help over here and will be able to give you a full account of our affairs. I have also to thank you for your three most interesting letters which were a real pleasure to read and to receive.

Everything seems perfect *now* and I can only hope and pray that the weather will not change in the interval. For us that interval is trying as we have nothing to say to Russia, to the United States or to many enquirers here. However, it may be that the luck will hold and certainly the destruction of the enemy armour will open the door to many possibilities.

At present we have scarcely any military credit and it is little use talking to the United States, to Russia, to Spain, to Turkey or to Weygand. Should success attend your efforts, I shall try my utmost to win the last-named factor by the offer of a substantial force and I am not without hopes of obtaining American support. I fully agree with Middle East that the acquisition of Bizerta, and

all that would imply, would be the best of all. But we have no right to count upon it.

I was very sorry to give up 'Whipcord'. The Chiefs of Staff were so keen upon it and so were the appointed commanders. It was, however, perhaps 'a task beyond the compass of our stride'. For the reasons I gave in my telegram to you, I do not think the opportunity will remain open.

Whiteley will tell you of my talk with him. You need not worry about the last 1,000 Australians in Tobruk or let their relief complicate your future plans. They can come out by the front door instead of the back. I also think that you ought to make sure of having some refreshment from Malta during 'Acrobat'. Whiteley is going into this with Dobbie<sup>1</sup> on his return. Even if you look at it as no more than an extra insurance, it would be prudent.

I am going to have an enquiry for my personal information into the tragical lack of contact between the War Office and the Ministry of Supply on the one hand and Middle East reception on the other about the front axles of the 22nd Armoured Brigade. This is not so much for the purpose of fixing responsibility as for avoiding a recurrence of such breakdowns. Considering the many months over which tanks have been passing from us to you, it is astonishing that no one at your end thought of saying, 'We distrust all your axles and are fitting our slabs to strengthen them thus taking (so many) days'; or that no one from our end arrived with the tanks able to answer all your questions and to give a good warrant. On such mishaps the fates of battles and of empires turn.

I am greatly cheered by what the Brigadier has told me of the way in which you are concentrating all your power upon the destruction of the enemy's armour and of his armed force generally. Here is the true principle. '... Seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you,' or, as Napoleon put it, 'Frappez la masse et tout le reste vient par surcroît'.

If only the whole story, with all its complications, its hopes and its griefs, could have been on that noble and generous note; but this was not to be.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. Sir William Dobbie, V.C., then Governor and C.-in-C. of Malta.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### 'Crusader'—17-23 November 1941

THERE was, however, one more change in the weather, as Churchill put it, one more sudden, unexpected and exasperating obstacle in 'Crusader's' never very smooth or easy path.

At the Commanders-in-Chief Conference on October 3, November 11 had been chosen as the day on which the offensive should begin; the whole operation was geared to this date. By the middle of the month the effect of the axle deficiencies of the vehicles of 22nd Armoured Brigade had been such that the opening was postponed to November 15.

The 1st South African Division had what others in the Desert regarded—the South African Official History admits this candidly—as 'lavish ideas of transport'. Over the preparatory months transport in accordance with these ideas was not forthcoming; the lack of it adversely affected training, in the opinion of General G. E. Brink, the divisional commander. At the end of October, when the division was asked to take part in a badly needed corps exercise, General Brink replied that it could not take part in any such scheme until November 21. On November 2 General Norrie, the commander of 30th Corps (of which the 1st South African Division formed part) visited the division and reported to Eighth Army H.Q. thereafter:

... I am not at all satisfied with the progress of training of 1 S.A. Div. due to factors beyond their own control. ... 1 S.A. Div. has ... had very little experience of desert training or any real experience of desert conditions. ... Without the transport this has not been possible. ... The spirit of the division and the desire to fight could not be better. However, unless more time for desert training is provided, I cannot see how this division can be expected to succeed on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 90.

On November 3 Auchinleck went up to Mersa Matruh and saw Cunningham, Norrie and Brink. Brink put his case to Auchinleck, who thanked him for his frankness, but remarked that the date of the offensive was a matter not entirely in his hands. The South African Official History subsequently gave a candid account of this episode from General Brink's point of view. Brink asked for six further days for training; he was finally conceded three. The Commander-in-Chief's reasons for this decision and his feelings at having to make it were set out with similar forthrightness:

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*8 November 1941*

... I am afraid that this further postponement of 'Crusader' must have been a blow to you, and I can only say that I am deeply grieved to have had to add this further anxiety to your already heavy burden. I ask you to believe me when I say that I do realize what this delay of three days means to you, and that I would not have inflicted it on you had I not been certain in my own mind that it was necessary and, in the circumstances, unavoidable. I am very much upset myself, chiefly because I feel that I must have caused you bitter disappointment.

I became aware of General Brink's doubt as to the readiness of his division—the 1st South African—for its task on Monday, when I was visiting the troops in the Western Desert. His fears were based on what he considered to be the insufficient training of the division, and one of its brigades in particular, in mechanized movement in open formation in the desert. This insufficiency of training was said to be due to the fact that the full scale of vehicles for the division had not been issued to it by the date on which they had been promised. He was quite honest about it, and said that he was prepared to go into battle on the assigned date if I ordered him to do so, but that he would not feel confident in himself or his division.

The first question I asked myself was why was this lack of confidence not disclosed before, and the only answer I can find is that General Brink, in common with many of his fellow countrymen, is secretive and reserved by nature. Their disinclination to commit themselves to a definite statement is very marked, as I have found out for myself in my dealings with them on other matters. They are magnificent men, but they have their own peculiar traits. The corps commander, General Willoughby Norrie, might have found out the state of affairs, but, as you know, he has only recently been appointed and has been very fully occupied in organizing his headquarters and in supervising the

training of the armoured brigades of his division, with the result that the South Africans have been left rather to themselves.

As you may imagine, this disclosure of unreadiness or alleged unreadiness gave me a great shock, and I investigated it at once on the spot with Generals Cunningham, Brink and Willoughby Norrie. I came to the conclusion that the psychological effect of forcing General Brink to go into battle without his having full confidence in himself or his division might be disastrous. As you know, everything hangs on the action of the Armoured Corps, of which the 1st South African Division is an integral and important part with a difficult role to play. So much depends on the result of this action, which may be decided one way or another in the course of a few hours, that I felt I could not risk any grave weakness in the machinery. I told General Cunningham, therefore, to investigate at once the possibility of substituting the 4th Indian Division, which is in the front line facing the enemy at Halfaya and Sollum, for the South Africans. His staff worked all night at this and reported next morning that it was possible, at the cost of much dislocation of existing plans and arrangements. The 4th Indian Division is very well trained and ably commanded, and I considered this alternative very carefully, but eventually discarded it.

My reasons for discarding it were chiefly because the 1st South African Division has always been a fully motorized division with its own armoured car regiment and a quota of armoured cars in each individual battalion as well. It is also much more heavily armed with mortars and machine-guns than the Indian Division. Generals Cunningham and Norrie both pressed for the retention of the South Africans in their original role for the reasons I have given.

I also considered the substitution of the New Zealand Division for the South Africans, but rejected this because the New Zealanders have an important role of their own to play, for which they, and the heavy tanks which are to work with them, have been very well and intensively trained by General Freyberg.

In the end, with the greatest reluctance and with bitter feelings, I agreed to a three days' postponement, which General Brink assured General Cunningham would just give him time to carry out the extra full-scale exercise he wished to do to complete his training. He originally wanted six days. That is the whole story, a most unsatisfactory one I feel, and one that has affected me deeply. . . .

\* \* \*



The Prime Minister bore this last postponement with composure and no show of ill-temper. All was sunshine now, though the storms of the previous weeks, and their causes, were not forgotten but only pigeon-holed in that capacious, formidable memory. Meanwhile, what was Rommel up to? He might be preparing to have some leave in Rome at the beginning of November, but as October drew towards its end he was far from idle. In the words of the South African Official History, he 'began to feel solid ground under his feet'. His main object, which one of his staff has described as an 'obsession', was to capture Tobruk. On October 26—while G.H.Q. Cairo, the Chiefs of Staff in London and the Defence Committee of the Cabinet were thrashing out the implications of 'Whipcord'—Rommel issued the detailed operation order for an assault on the fortress some time between November 15 and 20.<sup>1</sup> Although Rommel's supply position improved considerably in the latter half of October, his plans, too, were subject to delay, and the date of his attack on Tobruk was finally fixed for November 21. He went off to Rome to have his leave, to spend his birthday (November 15) with his wife, and to get formal permission from higher authority for his Tobruk offensive—a matter which usually bothered Rommel a good deal less than it bothered Auchinleck.

The effectiveness of the way in which the large-scale preparations for an offensive had been concealed must be stressed. It was true that Rommel and his staff had their eyes so firmly fixed on Tobruk that they tended to dismiss any hints or clues offered to them by their enemies' movements. As late as November 11, three days after the British corps commanders, General Godwin-Austen and General Norrie, had issued their final operational orders, the head of Panzergruppe's Intelligence section said of his Italian opposite number, 'Major Revetria is much too nervous. Tell him he mustn't worry, because the British won't attack.'

The most that Rommel would concede was that the British might make a diversion to relieve the pressure on Tobruk, after the assault had actually begun. He refused even to look at aerial photographs of the extension of the Desert railway westwards from Matruh, and threw them on the ground when they were shown to him.<sup>2</sup> While he

<sup>1</sup> When he told O.K.W. of his intentions, they were apprehensive and bade him put it off until January 1942. Rommel would have none of this, and urged that, with the current state of shipping in the Mediterranean, any postponement (the word that haunts the Desert at this time) would be very adverse to Afrika Korps's chances.

<sup>2</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 101. This anecdote is strangely reminiscent of that told, after World War I, about the preparations for the great



was in Rome, with von Ravenstein, the commander of the 21st Panzer Division, he had a quarrel with von Rintelen, the Germans' chief liaison officer with the Italian Army, because he passed on to him the order not to attack. He deluded himself and, as the South African Official History observes, 'paid the penalty of self-delusion'. He remained determined to have his own battle in his own way.

The assault on Tobruk was to be made by the 90th Light Division, the 15th Panzer Division and two Italian infantry divisions. As a covering force Rommel moved the Ariete Armoured Division, the Trieste Motorized Division and the 21st Panzer Division into the area south and south-east of Tobruk between Bir Hacheim and Trigh Capuzzo, where they were to form a mobile defence against any relieving attacks which British forces might mount either on the rear of the Tobruk assault force or on the Sollum front. Meanwhile the siege of Tobruk was maintained by the Brescia and Trento Divisions, both Italian. These arrangements were completed by November 16. British Intelligence was by no means unaware of them; all that was not known was the actual date of the attack. But in the harsh game of blind man's buff, which was an important facet of desert warfare, Rommel was now the one with his eyes bandaged.

From November 11 onwards Eighth Army moved into the final preparatory phase before 'Crusader'. The purpose and plan of the offensive had been succinctly defined by Auchinleck in a note of October 30.<sup>1</sup> The object was now simply stated as 'to destroy enemy armoured forces'. 30th Corps with all available cruiser and American tanks was to be directed on Tobruk, in order to bring the enemy main armoured formations to battle, and destroy them east of Tobruk. The Tobruk garrison was to sally out and assist the main attack by threatening the enemy's rear and flank and distracting his attention. 13th Corps was to hold the ground east of the enemy positions at Halfaya and Sidi Omar, to be ready to stop any attempt to strike at the advanced base area, and to move forward at once, as soon as success had been achieved in the armoured battle, to attack the enemy in their rear around Bardia, Sollum and Sidi

Passchendaele offensive in 1917. Some forward formations sent back to G.H.Q. maps and weather charts showing that the ground, due to be subjected to a terrific artillery pounding, was subject to flooding; a peremptory order was given: 'Don't send back any more of those ridiculous maps.'

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, Appendix 5. Auchinleck said many years afterwards: 'I did consider the possibility of delaying the offensive until Rommel had launched his, and then attacking him with his back to us; but we did not know his date.'

Omar and towards Tobruk. Light mobile forces, based on Madalena and Jarabub, were to move west and north-west to attack enemy lines of communication and airfields near Mechili and Jalo, but not before 30th Corps began its advance on Tobruk. The note concluded: 'Full arrangements to be made to pursue enemy with improvised mobile columns at once, if he tries to slip away towards Benghazi and El Aghcila after an unsuccessful battle.'

This breathed a spirit of great confidence. Was it over-optimistic? Was it right to assume that the only course open to Rommel after the armoured battle would be to slip away to the west? Whatever shifts of opinion may have been induced by subsequent study and reflection, there is no doubt that the dominant theme of 'Crusader' was that the enemy's armour was going to be sought out and destroyed, that the accomplishment of this object became an article of faith in Eighth Army, and that the Commander-in-Chief's confidence was fully shared by all his subordinate commanders.<sup>1</sup>

Soldiers' confidence in themselves, their weapons and their commanders, and in the ultimate assurance of victory, is as necessary as it is splendid. In the long, level light of history this splendour is inevitably tinged with irony and with grief for hopes overthrown. But to every army worth its name, to every commander worth his salt, there comes this great morning of hope. All local adversities in Eighth Army, said the South African Official History, 'paled before the great burst of enthusiasm that saluted November 18'. The official narrative of the New Zealand Division recorded that morale 'was at its peak, a level never surpassed'. Brigadier Desmond Young, who had been a youthful battalion commander on the Western Front in World War I, described the Army's mood as 'an exhilaration, a will to victory that I had not seen equalled since the final battles at the end of the first war'.

A New Zealander, then commanding a brigade, wrote afterwards:

In the morning of November 12 we took our place in the column. . . . We felt like runners, tense for the pistol. This great approach march will always be remembered by those who took part in it, though the details are vague in memory. The whole Eighth Army, 7th Armoured Division, 1st South African Division, and the 2nd New Zealand and 4th Indian Divisions moved

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Murphy, the New Zealand official historian, says that the reason for this confidence 'would seem to lie in the spirit of Eighth Army in its early months which, seeping upwards rather than downwards, inflated even the planners with a boisterous optimism which admitted no thought of defeat'.

westwards in an enormous column, the armour leading. The Army moved south of Sidi Barrani, past the desolate Italian camps of the previous year, along the plateau south of the great escarpment, through the frontier wire and into Libya, south of the enemy garrisons in the Sidi Omars, and wheeled north.<sup>1</sup>

For the first time in more than two years of war a British force was to come into conflict with the German Army, sure that in numbers, equipment and fighting capacity it could meet its adversary on level terms. The moment was one of challenging grandeur.

The sense of it was characteristically expressed by the Prime Minister. Late on the night of November 15 he sent this signal to General Auchinleck:

I have it in command from the King to express to all ranks of the Army and R.A.F. in the Western Desert, and to the Mediterranean Fleet, His Majesty's confidence that they will do their duty with exemplary devotion in the supremely important battle which lies before them. For the first time British and Empire troops will meet the Germans with an ample equipment in modern weapons of all kinds. The battle itself will affect the whole course of the war. Now is the time to strike the hardest blow yet struck for final victory, home and freedom. The Desert Army may add a page to history which will rank with Blenheim and with Waterloo. The eyes of all nations are upon you. All our hearts are with you. May God uphold the right!

\* \* \*

During the earlier part of November the weather throughout the Middle East had been hot and humid, with a late but not unprecedented khamsin sending the temperature up to midsummer heights. Over the week-end of November 15-16 the rain-clouds piled up, and the sunsets were of lurid, storm-laden magnificence.

On the night of November 17 the storm broke. It was, wrote one war correspondent with Eighth Army, 'the most spectacular thunderstorm within local memory. . . . Up to the north and west vivid, jagged flashes of lightning tore the sky. . . . The thunder mumbled and murmured and roared in long, growling cadences, and burst overhead with a crack like a bomb . . . then the rain came drumming down on our sleeping-bags, a sharp, penetrating rain which hissed into the desert dust.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Infantry Brigadier* by Maj.-Gen. Sir Howard Kippenberger, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Three Against Rommel* by Alexander Clifford, p. 127.

Another said: 'It rained in squalls of bitter sleet; the water seeped through bedding, blankets, groundsheets—everything. Men crouched against the sides of tanks and guns in the futile struggle to keep dry. . . . It was a cold, miserable and disheartening start for the battle.'<sup>1</sup>

Those who fared worst were probably the South Africans. Not all of them had yet been issued with battle-dress; and these, shivering under their wet blankets in the drill shirts and shorts appropriate to a tropical summer 'wondered why anyone should ever have found it necessary to sing of "The Burning Sands of Egypt"'.<sup>2</sup>

The storm had a direct effect on the impending operations. On the naval side, three British cruisers and three destroyers were off Halfaya just after midnight, ready to bombard enemy positions; no contact could be made with any spotting aircraft, visibility was down to five hundred yards, and the operation was called off. In the air, the Axis forces were especially unfortunate. Every airfield they had was flooded and out of commission, and it was impossible to perform any aerial reconnaissance on November 18.

On this tempestuous night, at Beda Littoria, two hundred miles behind the Axis front, thirty officers and men (all that could be landed from a detachment of fifty ferried thither by submarine) of 11th Scottish Commando, led by Colonel Laycock<sup>3</sup> and Lieutenant-Colonel Geoffrey Keyes, the twenty-four-year-old son of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes, cut telegraph and telephone lines and, a few minutes before midnight, attacked what they believed to be Panzergruppe Headquarters, as a prelude to the main offensive. The house which they entered had indeed been Rommel's H.Q.: he himself had had the first floor, his A.D.C.s had been on the ground floor. It was now occupied by the Quartermaster staff. There was fierce fighting in a pitch-dark room; the Germans lost two officers killed, and two other ranks. Colonel Keyes was killed.<sup>4</sup> The Commandos' information was only a little out of date—but enough to rob the operation of success, though not of glory.

The worst of the storm was over when dawn broke. The day was cold and quiet, the sky overcast. The rain lay in big, glistening sheets in the pans and hollows of the desert. Through many a dawn in the

<sup>1</sup> *A Year of Battle* by Alan Moorehead, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Later Gen. Sir Robert Laycock, Governor of Malta.

<sup>4</sup> He was awarded a posthumous V.C. In his last letter to his parents, which reached them many weeks later, he said: 'If the thing is a success, whether I get bagged or not, it will raise our stock a bit and help the cause.'

weeks that followed the tanks would clatter and roar into movement, but the 'thrill of anticipation'—in the words of one who shared it—with which the tanks of 7th Armoured Division broke leaguer on this first morning and drove across the symbolical Frontier Wire was never to be repeated.

Eighth Army swept forward to battle. The wide, broken plateau over which 30th Corps advanced tilted almost imperceptibly up to the north until it reached the line of escarpments separating it from the coast. The horizons were wide and empty. Overhead no enemy aircraft broke through the cover of low, grey cloud; and for some hours nothing appeared to disturb the stillness of the desert or 'the monotony of the endless gravel wastes and widely scattered tufts of stunted bush'.<sup>1</sup> Theirs was by far the longer advance, and in this phase was quite unopposed. By evening the armoured brigades had reached their battle positions on the Trigh el Abd, with the exception of the 22nd Armoured Brigade, which had been delayed and halted ten miles south of its destination. The 1st South African Division was moving in a wider sweep to the southward, to cover the west flank. 13th Corps meanwhile, with a much shorter final approach march, advanced eastwards towards Tobruk on the coast road and the Trigh Capuzzo.

'Our offensive,' said Auchinleck in his despatch, 'surprised the enemy. Indeed, I believe that at least for one day, if not for two, he thought we were making a reconnaissance in force.'

General Bayerlein said: 'It was not until the afternoon of November 18 that the Panzer Group realized that the enemy had launched an offensive.'<sup>2</sup>

It was therefore on the following day, November 19, that the armoured battle began in grim earnest. 'Crusader', so meticulously planned and launched with such skill and such confidence, developed into the first phase of the Battle of Sidi Rezegh. No single description can be more apt than that it was enveloped in the fog of war. It was a strange, bewildering battle to fight; with the aid of maps, the accounts of individual experiences (which are numerous and vivid), and the careful reconstructions of unit historians, it remains an even more than ordinarily difficult battle to describe lucidly and consecutively. The pattern imposed by the original plan—of itself probably too rigid—broke up rapidly and totally, and it became a dusty, smoky swirl of confusion, disaster, muddle, heroism and glory. What happened, incident by incident, engagement by engagement,

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 159.

can never be sorted out; its consequences became desolately clear immediately afterwards.

As Churchill saw, the personal interventions of the two opposing commanders, Auchinleck and Rommel, were masterly and, each in its turn, decisive. Rommel, in Cruewell<sup>1</sup> and von Ravenstein, had excellent subordinate commanders, tactically quick and resolute. He himself, once he shook off his obsession with the capture of Tobruk, was at the summit of his capacity. He was taken by surprise, he lost at least a day, and during two crucial days (November 19 and 20) he appears to have left the tactical conduct of the battle to Cruewell. But when he did intervene, on the morning of November 21, it was with tremendous effect; he seized back the initiative and inflicted crippling losses on a numerically superior opponent.

This, however, was not the end of the battle—as Rommel himself was bleakly aware. In Auchinleck's intervention there was an equally powerful counter-stroke to come. For many days the result of the battle was in the balance. Then, when Auchinleck by the imposition of his own will and authority and the exercise of his military skill and judgment—as a strategist as well as a tactician—had turned defeat and retreat into victory and advance, and Rommel had been driven back from Cyrenaica into Tripolitania, which had been not the primary but the secondary object of 'Crusader', circumstances far outside his control snatched from him the chance finally to consolidate his victory. The god of battles wears an ironic smile.

On the morning of November 19, 30th Corps launched a three-pronged advance northwards across the plateau towards the escarpment. On the left, the 22nd Armoured Brigade had a hot fight with the Ariete Division, forced them back and reached Bir el Gubi. On the right, 4th Armoured Brigade encountered and was pretty severely mauled by 21st Panzer Division. Throughout the day 7th Armoured Brigade was engaged in the centre mainly in skirmishing, from which the 6th Royal Tank Regiment shook themselves free and moved north-west on Sidi Rezegh, reached the airfield, and established themselves on the escarpment, little more than ten miles from the Tobruk perimeter. Here the Support Group of 7th Armoured Division and the remainder of the 7th Armoured Brigade joined them next morning.

General Norrie judged—and judged rightly—that the greater part of Cruewell's armour was in the Gabr Salch area, and during November 19 moved 22nd Armoured Brigade across from Bir el

<sup>1</sup> When Rommel's Command was raised to the status of a Panzer Group, Lieut.-Gen. Ludwig Cruewell was appointed commander of the Afrika Korps, with Bayerlein as his Chief of Staff.

Gubi, leaving the 1st South African Division facing the Ariete Division.

During the night of November 19 and into the early morning of November 20 the situation seemed to 30th Corps Headquarters to be a good deal more satisfactory than in truth it was. 7th Armoured Division had not been kept concentrated, in accordance with the original plan; it was now widely dispersed. 22nd Armoured Brigade was still near Bir el Gubi, recovering from its unexpectedly sharp encounter with the Ariete Division; 7th Armoured Brigade and the Support Group were spread out on the road to Sidi Rezegh, twenty-five miles north of Gubi; and 4th Armoured Brigade, in far more difficulties than had been foreseen, were near Gabr Saleh, nearly thirty-five miles south-east of Sidi Rezegh.

Bayerlein summed up the German opinion of the state of play at this moment:

Rommel's plan, taking into account our inferior strength and the limited usefulness of the Italians, was to concentrate his mobile formations into one compact force, and defeat the enemy formations one after the other, until finally the entire British striking force had been destroyed. The British obliged by throwing their armoured brigades into the battle in separate units.<sup>1</sup>

No clear reasons for this dispersal have ever been adduced. Neither 30th Corps nor Eighth Army Headquarters had much idea of what was happening. G.H.Q. in Cairo was fed with scrappily optimistic situation reports. Wireless communication between units and headquarters was so faulty as to create something near chaos. 'It was not,' the New Zealand official historian commented, 'a good beginning to a battle whose aim was the total destruction of the enemy armour.' Yet the odd, incontestable fact emerges that Rommel's immediate reaction to the British advance into Cyrenaica was what the planners had predicted.

What went wrong? If the naval analogy is maintained, it will be seen that the massive fleet-to-fleet clash, in which British superiority in numbers was expected to prevail, did not occur; the 'fleet' broke up instead into small 'squadrons' and 'flotillas', which were heavily battered in isolation from one another. A Trafalgar had been anticipated; what happened was a Jutland.

The sombre and confusing course of events in the next few days must now be traced. The inadequacy of communications masked the dangerously illusory quality of the optimism which prevailed at

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 159.

30th Corps Headquarters on November 19-20. General Norrie asked that the sortie by 70th Division from Tobruk should be made on the morning of November 21. General Cunningham, who spent the night of November 19-20 at 30th Corps H.Q., but left at dawn to return to Eighth Army H.Q., assented to this proposal. November 20 was a day of sinister and obscure hide-and-seek. Nobody on the British side could see the battle as a whole. Rommel and Cruewell, though the situation was almost as confusing to them as to the British commanders, put the pieces together with greater accuracy, seized the all-important advantage of the dispersal of the British armour, and hit hard, throughout November 20, at times and in places of their own choosing.

As the British saw that day, 'there were strong indications of considerable enemy movement westwards, away from the battleground, and it seemed quite possible that the enemy was trying to avoid conflict. At the same time the greater part of the enemy's armoured forces appeared to be engaged with our armoured brigades away to the south near Gabr Saleh.'<sup>1</sup>

The German assessment was very different: 'On the 20th the Afrika Korps continued and developed its pressure on the enemy's right flank, and destroyed many tanks in the day's fighting. Both our divisions won through to the area Gabr Saleh-Sidi Omar, a good base for an attack on the rear of the enemy's centre column.'<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the day—the weather had improved, and it was fine, clear and cool—4th Armoured Brigade, which had borne the brunt of Cruewell's attack, had left in action ninety-seven tanks out of the 165 with which they had crossed the Wire three days before. 22nd Armoured Brigade, which had had to refuel, reload with ammunition and travel some thirty miles eastward to their support, only arrived at sunset, some six and a half hours after the battle had begun, and were able to take no part in it. Yet all day, only seven miles away, the New Zealand Division—three brigades in full battle order, fully equipped and properly trained, with a battalion of 'I' tanks and a full complement of divisional artillery—stood waiting to play its part in the westward advance of 13th Corps, whose start had not yet been sanctioned. During the day General Freyberg indeed sent a liaison patrol to 4th Armoured Brigade, offering the support of his division, but Brigadier (later Major-General) A. H. Gatehouse declined the assistance.

The explanation of this courageous but puzzling decision is twofold: first, in all the previous planning, it had been laid down that

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 159.



13th Corps would play no part in the armoured clash, and this was rigidly adhered to by Eighth Army; and second, the doctrine had grown up in Egypt, 'all exhortations of senior officers notwithstanding . . . that armour should be left to fight its own battles without calling in the pedestrian assistance of an infantry division'.<sup>1</sup>

The crisis of its fate was now imminent for 30th Corps as the dispersed and badly battered armoured units leaguered for the night. Only in the north on the Sidi Rezegh escarpment and the edge of the airfield, where the day had been relatively quiet—a squadron of the Regia Aeronautica and its not very formidable ground defence troops having been zestfully seen off on the previous evening—was there any marked sign of success, and even this was soon to prove illusory.

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Trust, in those subordinate to him as well as in those in authority over him, was an inalienable part of Auchinleck's nature. The paucity of information from the combat area in the first few days of 'Crusader' did not disturb him. What would have shocked him into action, earlier and more decisive even than that which he eventually took, would have been the realization that such information as did reach G.H.Q. was over-optimistic and founded on faulty premises. In London, however, was the Prime Minister, athirst for news and, when he spoke in the Commons, he liked that news to be red-hot. Auchinleck endeavoured to satisfy him.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

19 November 1941

It now seems that the enemy was surprised and unaware of the imminence and weight of our blow. Indications, though they have to be confirmed, are that he is now trying to withdraw from the area of Bardia-Sollum.<sup>2</sup> Until we know the area reached by our armoured troops today it is not possible to read the battle further at the moment. I myself am happy about the situation. . . .

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

20 November 1941

I am glad things have opened well. We scrupulously observed your wish about no indication scale of offensive being published.

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> R.A.F. bombers returning to their bases between 13.00 and 16.00 hours that afternoon had 'reported much enemy movement westward, along the roads from Tobruk to Gazala, from El Adem to Acroma, and from Bardia westwards again to Tobruk'. Ibid. p. 152. The South African historians describe this report as 'remarkable' and 'puzzling'.

I would rather you had not released a communiqué from Cairo in these circumstances as we have to deal with Press and public here. Communiqué itself is perhaps precipitate in praising at so early a stage the skill of deception employed. It is much better to let events tell their own tale. For next few days all your communiqués should be issued through London and not through Cairo. Send all here at earliest. We shall be most careful to help you in every way.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*20 November 1941*

Regret our communiqué seemed unsuitable to you. Reference to success of secrecy measures was put in for a definite purpose. Entirely agree as to desirability of letting events speak for themselves, a view to which I am naturally strongly inclined personally. It is, however, inconsistent with pressure put on us to be more communicative. I submit that the editing of our communiqués in London as proposed in your telegram is likely to prove dangerous and unworkable. In this connexion I ask you to refer to your personal telegram of 15 April 1941 to General Wavell. In my opinion a communiqué is a weapon which can be used against the enemy and conversely against us unless controlled absolutely by the higher command on the spot. It will *not* be possible for anyone in London to appreciate the immediate effect on the enemy in this theatre of *any* alteration in the wording of communiqués drafted here and I request therefore that you will *not* insist on the procedure laid down in your telegram. I will ensure that communiqués issued from here are confined to bald statements and not embroidered in any way. As there will not be time for me to receive your reply to this telegram before this evening we shall send today's communiqué to London for issue but I strongly urge that it be published as drafted here and not altered. In any event it seems as if we must release this communiqué here tonight so that something can appear in the Egyptian Press tomorrow. Failure to issue a communiqué here is certain to cause undue alarm and despondency locally.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*21 November 1941*

You may return to procedure in my telegram of April 15 quoted by you. Naturally we are inconvenienced here when first news for publication long-awaited important events reaches us through your Cairo communiqué issued to the world. You promised to keep me properly informed. Pray remember we have a Parliament, Press and public here at least as important as your

Cairo audience. Moreover I have to deal with President Roosevelt whose action at Vichy about Weygand or his successor is of the highest consequence.

From what I learn from special sources which you know I have formed a favourable impression of our operation. I should be glad to have your own appreciation.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

21 November 1941

Engagements between the 22nd Armoured Brigade and enemy armoured forces at El Gubi on November 18 heavier than earlier reports showed and apparently resulted in our losing about forty cruiser tanks, of which many have since been repaired. Sidi Rezegh is held by the Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division and the 5th South African Infantry Brigade. Tobruk garrison made its sally this morning. . . . It is very difficult to arrive at a firm estimate of the enemy tank losses as the battle has moved and is moving with such great speed. . . . A marked feature of operations to date has been our complete air supremacy and excellent co-operation between ground and air.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

22 November 1941

Thank you for the very full information now flowing. I might perhaps broadcast Sunday night if it seems expedient, so please let me have anything that comes to hand. What I say will of course be on most general lines like my statement in the House of Commons. I am anxious however to make any success tell fully all over the world and especially with the French. The moment we can really claim a victory I propose to address the President about an offer Vichy. I fear very much the Germans may get hold of Bizerta unless we can rouse the French to a last effort. This can only be done through Roosevelt. It is not impossible that he might offer troops.

Let me know for my most secret information how your mind is moving towards extensive exploitation westwards. It may be things will go with a run, in which case I presume you will run considerable risks with your light forces.

Everything seems to have gone splendidly so far.

The effects of the optimism which was prevalent in 30th Corps Headquarters in the first three days of 'Crusader' were, to put it with restraint, far-reaching. The shock was bound to be all the graver when the true facts of the situation became apparent. The opening of the offensive coincided with a major change in the personnel of the

small group of men responsible for the control of policy and strategy at the highest level. On Sunday, November 16, the Prime Minister had General Alan Brooke, then C.-in-C. Home Forces, to stay with him at Chequers. After dinner he took Brooke into his study and told him that as Dill had had a hard time and was a tired man, he proposed to relieve him by making him a Field-Marshal and Governor of Bombay; on November 18 Dill told Kennedy of the Prime Minister's decision.<sup>1</sup>

There can be no doubt that Dill was worn out; he was suffering from shingles, caused by worry and nervous exhaustion. He continued to go to his office for a few days more and read papers; his next two personal signals to Auchinleck were brief and poignant, and full of thought not for himself but for others.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*19 November 1941*

You have everyone's confidence not only for the present battle but for great future successes. My thoughts are with you and my prayers are for you.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*25 November 1941*

In a recent despatch on the effects of the war in South Africa, Harlech<sup>2</sup> expresses the view that the maintenance of the Union war effort at anything like its present level is dependent on the life of Field-Marshal Smuts, and draws particular attention to the risks consequent on calls made upon him to visit the Middle East by air. I agree with this view and shall be glad if you will discourage him from doing this unless absolutely necessary.

It had been arranged that Brooke should not take over until December 1. For close on a fortnight, therefore, there was virtually no C.I.G.S. His place at meetings of the Chiefs of Staff and in day-to-day contact with the Prime Minister was taken by General Kennedy. Dill's gradual fading-out (though he was to recover much of his energy and add greatly to the lustre of his reputation in his next task in Washington) was sad, but neither he nor anyone else in his post at that time could have had any effect on the course of the battle, or could have helped Auchinleck.

Not that he needed help; for he was about to prove, in a moment

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 178: 'The world is upside down for me. I am to go. The Prime Minister told me last night. Brooke is to be C.I.G.S. ...'

<sup>2</sup> Lord Harlech, then U.K. High Commissioner in the Union of South Africa.

of gravest challenge, what Churchill has generously and justly called 'his outstanding qualities as a commander in the field'.<sup>1</sup>

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On November 20 Rommel wrote to his wife: 'The enemy offensive began immediately after my arrival. The battle has now reached its crisis. I hope we get through it in good order. . . . Our position is certainly not easy.'<sup>2</sup>

Difficult though he may have thought it, he now turned it swiftly and dramatically to his own advantage. He issued his orders for the following day and insisted that punctuality in the timing of operations would prove decisive. It did. Literally as well as metaphorically the Germans were up earlier—a great deal earlier—than the British on the morning of November 21. Both in 30th Corps H.Q. and Eighth Army H.Q. it was believed that the enemy were either defeated or unwilling to fight to a finish. The events of a few fierce morning hours were to show how dangerous had been this delusion.

Auchinleck said in his despatch that 'the blow at the bottle-neck in the enemy's communications had been shrewdly aimed'—but it had not yet gone home completely. This, the capture of the main enemy airfield at Sidi Rezegh, was to be the task of the Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division and the 7th Armoured Brigade, which had leaguered the previous night on the plateau to the north of the ridge which was now held in strength by a mixed force of Italians and Germans. It was timed to follow by a few hours the sortie by 70th Division in Tobruk against the Italians holding the perimeter.

'Rommel,' Auchinleck continued, 'summoned all his armoured forces to deny us the commanding positions we were clearly about to gain. Only half an hour before the Support Group was due to launch its attack, two strong enemy armoured columns were sighted to the south-east heading for Sidi Rezegh. Zero hour for the 70th Division had long passed and there was no going back. Brigadier Davy,<sup>3</sup> who was directing operations, therefore decided to leave only one armoured regiment to support the attack and took the other two to meet the enemy columns.'<sup>4</sup>

During the night the 21st Panzer Group had made a rapid, unobserved march to the south-west, and had joined the 15th Panzer

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. III, p. 505.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> Brig. G. M. O. Davy, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.

<sup>4</sup> Despatch, p. 29.

Group near Gabr Saleh, facing the British 22nd and 4th Armoured Brigades. Not long before dawn they turned round and headed north-west. They were by no means in flight; they were coming to give battle. The prolonged, wide dispersal of 30th Corps's armoured forces was now to take its toll; and what had appeared to be (in the words of the South African Official History) 'the inconclusive wanderings of the Axis armour' came to a stern and bloody conclusion.

The full force of the Afrika Korps swept down, at twenty minutes past eight in the morning, on two regiments of somewhat outdated cruiser tanks, dispersed across a wide stretch of desert, with eight field guns 'somewhere in between'.<sup>1</sup> One of the regiments which stood bravely in the way of the onslaught of two panzer divisions was the 7th Hussars. Within three-quarters of an hour they had been virtually annihilated. At ten minutes past nine the 15th Panzer Division reported: 'Enemy pushed back over the escarpment. . . . Intention to push through to Belhamed. . . . The advance must be halted for the time being owing to ammunition shortage.'<sup>2</sup>

It was not a long halt. The survivors of the first clash had (in Auchinleck's words in his despatch) 'scarcely returned to the acrodrome and the Support Group had barely secured Sidi Rezegh, when they had to face about to throw off an attack from the south'. At half past eleven the enemy came on again; the artillery of the Support Group found themselves standing—as three hours earlier the two armoured regiments had stood—across the advance of the whole Afrika Korps. The gunners fought at a considerable disadvantage. Their two-pounders were outranged both by the heavy machine-guns and by the high-explosive fire of the fifty- and seventy-five-millimetre cannon of the panzers; their twenty-five pounders, though excellent field guns, were ineffective with solid shot save at under six hundred yards. 'The panzers were able to set vehicles ablaze, wreck guns, and kill and maim their crews, with little danger to themselves, and that the guns of the Royal Artillery held off the panzers at all was due primarily to the courage and devotion of the men who served them.'<sup>3</sup>

Six hours after its entry into the tactical area of Sidi Rezegh the Afrika Korps had inflicted severe losses on Eighth Army. The

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 181. The R.A. Commemoration Book calls this 'the toughest battle of the campaign, and one that will always stand out in the memory of those who took part in it as the bloodiest and most heroic encounter of the war'.

Tobruk sortie had made some progress, but had encountered stiffer opposition from the Italian Bologna and Pavia Divisions than had been anticipated.<sup>1</sup> There was no chance of 70th Division breaking through during the day and joining up with the Support Group.

Auchinleck's despatch gives a concise account of the rest of this hard-fought day:

By midday the situation at Sidi Rezegh had become critical. The enemy armoured divisions had in all probability joined forces and were clearly forming up for another attack. The defenders had suffered many casualties and were isolated. The 5th South African Infantry Brigade had not arrived. Brigadier Armstrong had obtained permission for the brigade to halt overnight on the plea that it was not sufficiently trained to move on a moonless night over unknown ground, and next morning had found himself confronted by tanks from the Ariete Division and could make no progress. The 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades had been summoned to the rescue, but could not be expected for some time.

The expected attack developed in the afternoon. The Support Group and the 7th Armoured Brigade resisted valiantly and at length compelled the enemy to abandon the attack. The inspiring example set by Brigadier Campbell<sup>2</sup> who led several tank charges in person greatly contributed to this result. The Support Group and 7th Armoured Brigade achieved this success practically single-handed; for the 22nd Armoured Brigade did not intervene until about an hour before dusk, while the 4th Armoured Brigade had been checked by a screen of eighty-eight-millimetre guns some miles to the south-east and never reached the scene.

Since the Headquarters of 7th Armoured Division, of 30th Corps and of Eighth Army were all a long way from the scene of the fighting, since communications were bad and any system of liaison officers, if it existed at all, was embryonic, there was complete misunderstanding (in all of them) about what had really happened. On the morning of November 21, everybody thought that Rommel's armoured forces had been or were being neutralized. With Auchinleck's agreement, therefore, Cunningham, at a quarter to nine that morning, gave orders for 13th Corps, which (had it been permitted)

<sup>1</sup> One facet of the general optimism which preceded 'Crusader' was this persistent underrating of the Italians' fighting capacity. It is probable that they were better led and better trained than their predecessors of the previous winter.

<sup>2</sup> Afterwards Maj.-Gen. Campbell, V.C.

could have intervened very effectively on the previous day when 4th Armoured Brigade took its hammering at Gabr Saleh, to make its long-planned advance towards Capuzzo, Bardia and Gambut.

The New Zealand Division moved forward and 'gained control of the country to the west of the enemy's line of fortresses up to the outskirts of Bardia. Capuzzo, Musaid and Sollum Barracks were occupied with little trouble.'<sup>1</sup>

This advance, by a force composed in the main of infantry, had an important and not unironic effect on Rommel's plans and dispositions. Detailed official—and unofficial—narratives have made it clear that it was not a particularly easy or comfortable advance, much of it made in darkness and rain. But it clinched in Rommel's mind the suspicion which had been ripening in it since the opening of the British offensive, and it reinforced in him his determination to capture Tobruk. Brigadier Desmond Young has written:

The advance of the New Zealand Division along the Trigh Capuzzo had come as an unpleasant surprise to him. If he concentrated all his force against it, he could doubtless destroy it and open up the road to his frontier positions again. But that would give time to what was left of 7th Armoured Division to refit. Meanwhile there was 70th Division on his flank. If he turned on 7th Armoured Division, south-east of Sidi Rezegh (as General Martel thinks he should have done), then the New Zealand Division would join up with 70th Division. If he played safe and retired to Gazala, it would mean abandoning the frontier garrisons, the stores there and his own dumps along the coast. His strength lay in his two panzer divisions. Was there any way in which he could use them, not merely to get himself out of an awkward situation or to pursue a ding-dong battle, but to recover the initiative and turn defeat into victory at one stroke? Yes, he decided—to thrust suddenly eastwards into our back areas and so disrupt our communications that General Cunningham would be glad to call the battle off and withdraw whence he came. He would then deal with Tobruk a few days later than he had intended.<sup>2</sup>

The drama of the contrasting interventions of the two opposing Commanders was nearing its climax. But meanwhile on Saturday and Sunday, November 22-23, the harsh harvest of complacency,

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 30. General Kippenberger (*Infantry Brigadier*, p. 87) says: 'Everything went like wedding bells.'

<sup>2</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 110.



illusory optimism and lack of accurate information was to be fully garnered. By nightfall on November 21 the immediate prospects for what remained of 30th Corps, now no longer widely dispersed but (though diminished and battered) concentrated in one battle area, could hardly be regarded as rosy. They had suffered considerable losses in muddled and inconclusive engagements; their numerical superiority had been much reduced; the tank crews were acquiring, after their experiences of the past forty-eight hours, 'a profound distrust in the vehicles in which they were called upon to fight'.<sup>1</sup> Yet their fighting spirit and their absolute confidence in victory were quite unbroken.

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There was a wintry quality about Sidi Rezegh which remained in the memory of all who survived it. The weather continued chilly with patches of bright sun in the daytime and cold rain during the hours of darkness. There was plenty of rain on the night of November 21-22 which, according to one rather mordant observer, 'turned the desert to the consistency of cold cream'.<sup>2</sup> These disagreeable conditions did not prevent either the New Zealanders from completing their seventeen-hour march to the outskirts of Bardia, or Cruewell from leading the 15th Panzer Division first eastwards and then northwards, completely unobserved by the British, in order to be in place for the 'mobile operations' south of Trigh Capuzzo which Rommel, earlier that evening, had ordered for November 22.

Auchinleck's despatch records briefly the course and the consequences of this day's operations.

Desultory fighting broke out again on the aerodrome during the morning of November 22, and in the afternoon developed into a pitched battle in which the enemy employed at least a hundred tanks, besides large numbers of anti-tank guns and infantry. On our side, in addition to the wearied Support Group and 7th Armoured Brigade, all three regiments of the 22nd Armoured Brigade were involved. The fog of war literally descended on the battlefield, for the clouds of dust and smoke raised by tanks and bursting shells made accurate shooting impossible, and at times it was difficult to tell friend from foe. At the conclusion of the battle, which raged until after dark, our armoured brigades were finally driven off the aerodrome. At the same time the Support

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Three Against Rommel* by Alexander Clifford, p. 138.

Group, attacked in overwhelming strength, was compelled to abandon Sidi Rezegh which it had defended for three days against odds and to retire to the southern escarpment, where it leaguered to the north of the armoured brigades.

The 5th South African Infantry Brigade had arrived during the morning and had been ordered to capture Point 178 on the southern escarpment which overlooked the western end of the valley, where the enemy was assembling to attack the aerodrome. Although they strove with determination to gain their objective, they fell short of it and finally received orders to abandon the attempt. The brigade then retired to leaguer to the west of the Support Group.

This, however, did not end the tale of the day's woes. The 15th Panzer Division, which had spent much of the day harassing the British rear and flank, to the south of Trigh Capuzzo, replenished and refuelled during the afternoon, and as dusk was falling (shortly after five o'clock), heard the last of the grim battle around the airfield, and in accordance with German tradition moved towards the sound of the guns. 'Directly in their path lay the Headquarters of 4th Armoured Brigade, well removed from the battle and unconscious of the presence of any enemy force in the desert to south or east. The ensuing clash took each side by surprise.'<sup>1</sup>

Gatehouse, the brigade commander, was on his way back from a conference with his divisional commander. His newly appointed second-in-command, seventeen other officers and 150 other ranks were taken prisoner in this extraordinary encounter. The Germans also captured thirty-five tanks, all the armoured cars and guns that were in the leaguer, and most of the brigade's wireless links. For the next twenty-four hours this brigade, which Gatehouse had carefully husbanded, which by now was the only substantial armoured force left to Eighth Army, '*ceased to be a fighting entity*'.<sup>2</sup>

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Sunday, November 23 had for the Germans a profound emotional significance. It was *Totensonntag*, the Day of the Dead, set aside for the solemn remembrance of those who died in the First World War. An hour and a half before midnight on November 22-23 General Rommel issued his orders for the following day. They envisaged, in

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 30.

the words of General Fritz Bayerlein, 'the destruction of the enemy's main striking force by a concentric attack of all German-Italian mobile forces'. Bayerlein continued:

That day Rommel was unable for the first time to issue his orders verbally and so the Afrika Korps received a lengthy wireless signal which would have taken far too long to transcribe and decode.<sup>1</sup> General Cruewell could not wait and, knowing Rommel's general plan, felt impelled to act on his own initiative. Accordingly he left his H.Q. at Gasr el Arid at about 05.30 hours to lead his troops personally in the forthcoming decisive battle. Half an hour later, his whole Headquarters staff together with almost the entire paraphernalia of command was surprised by the New Zealanders, who had come up from Sidi Azciz unobserved, and taken prisoner after a heroic defence. General Cruewell and I escaped this fate by a hair's breadth.

This considerable prize fell to the 6th New Zealand Brigade. The loss of this whole Headquarters had little or no deleterious effect on Cruewell's fighting capacity during that day; there were indeed certain cynical realists—undisciplined persons, scornful of the usual channels—who argued that he never fought better.

Illusions had at last been stripped away at 30th Corps H.Q. (and the uneasiness began to be felt in higher echelons) and Norrie's intentions for this Sunday were that the 22nd Armoured Brigade and the 5th South African Brigade should hold on to the ridge of Sidi Rezegh, assisted by the 1st South African Brigade, which was then coming up, and that the remnant of 30th Corps should collect and reform farther south under cover of this 'shield'.

Cruewell, however, made rapid hay of this idea. He had left the unarmoured part of 21st Panzer Division holding its position along the escarpment, had put its tank regiment under the command of the 15th Panzer Division, and had taken this combined force to the south-west to link up with the Ariete; he then intended to launch the whole remaining weight in a wheeling, northward charge which would drive the British back against the escarpment.

At half past seven, with the haze of early morning still swirling over the desert surface, the panzers came up from the south-west;

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 161. This is a singular observation. Part at least of this signal is printed in *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 233; it contains direct and explicit orders which, presumably, Rommel meant to be obeyed. Cruewell, to put it mildly, appears to have taken a leaf out of Admiral Nelson's book.

and their arrival was the rudest of shocks. They hit the administrative tail of the 5th South African Brigade and the now arriving head of the 1st. They advanced in two columns, one of which drove into the transport leaguers of the 7th Armoured Division and the 5th South African Brigade. The confusion as the mass of 'soft-skinned' vehicles tried to escape was truly formidable. Brigadier Jock Campbell, for the second time since the battle began, performed prodigies of valour and good sense in bringing some sort of order out of the chaos.

For as the *mêlée* began, the 3rd Royal Tanks (survivors of the many tribulations of 4th Armoured Brigade) 'were just moving south to join the rest of their brigade, and were startled to find a stream of transport rushing westward past them. Then they became engaged with a tank column some fifty strong. Their presence, fortuitous and very fortunate, helped to provide a shield at a critical time. Hastily reinforced by some artillery and anti-tank batteries, which hurried to "the sound of the guns", they succeeded in keeping this panzer column at bay—until, at about 11.30 a.m., the German tanks sheered off.'<sup>1</sup>

Cruewell had called them off in order to link up—as he had arranged—with the Ariete Division, which had been a good deal slower in making their rendezvous than the German Commander had wished; by the earlier afternoon, in an even wider out-flanking movement, he had reached a point south-east of Hagfed el Haiad, far in the British rear.

The result, however, was a lull in the middle of the day, which left open a way of escape to the east for the unarmoured British troops, who might otherwise have been cut off. As Liddell Hart has justly pointed out, the unexpected and stout resistance put up by the 3rd Royal Tanks in the morning had been an influential factor.

It is impossible to estimate accurately the number of tanks which Cruewell mustered for what he believed to be his final victorious onslaught on the British armoured forces which five days before had crossed the Wire in so splendid and so imposing an array. But it appears to have been in the region of 120. 'To these,' Auchinleck said in his despatch, 'the 22nd Armoured Brigade could oppose about forty, and the 7th Armoured Brigade only ten.' 4th Armoured Brigade, far away to the south-east, was still out of action.

At three o'clock Cruewell had his long lines of tanks and other vehicles marshalled as if on a parade-ground, in a manner at once arrogant and magnificent, and they rumbled into the advance.

<sup>1</sup> *The Tanks* by Capt. B. H. Liddell Hart, Vol. II, p. 123.

Bayerlein's account of the subsequent action was dramatic:

The attack started well, but soon came up against a wide artillery and anti-tank gun screen, which the South Africans had formed at a surprising speed between Haiad and Muftah. Guns of all kinds and sizes laid a curtain of fire in front of the attacking tanks and there seemed almost no hope of making any progress in the face of this fire-spewing barrier. Tank after tank split open in the hail of shells. Our entire artillery had to be thrown in to silence the enemy guns one by one. However, by the late afternoon we had managed to punch a few holes in the front. The tank attack moved forward again and tank duels of tremendous intensity developed deep in the battlefield. In fluctuating fighting, tank against tank, tank against gun or anti-tank nest, sometimes in frontal, sometimes in flanking assault, using every trick of mobile warfare and tank tactics, the enemy was finally forced back into a confined area. With no relief forthcoming from a Tobruk sortie, he now saw his only escape from complete destruction in a break-out from the ring surrounding him. . . .

The wide plain south of Sidi Rezegh was now a sea of dust, haze and smoke. Visibility was poor and many British tanks and guns were able to break away to the south and east without being caught. But a great part of the enemy force still remained inside. Twilight came, but the battle was still not over. Hundreds of burning vehicles, tanks and guns lit up the field of that *Totensonntag*. It was long after midnight before we could get any sort of picture of the day's events, organize our force, count our losses and gains and form an appreciation of the general situation upon which the next day's operations would depend. The most important results of this battle were the elimination of the direct threat to the Tobruk front, the destruction of a large part of the enemy armour and the damage to enemy morale caused by the complete ruin of his plans.

Auchinleck in his despatch wasted as few words as possible:

. . . When the enemy attacked the 5th South African Infantry Brigade with over a hundred tanks and a large force of lorried infantry in the afternoon of the 23rd, the 22nd Armoured Brigade was hopelessly outnumbered. The South Africans resisted gallantly, but the German attack was by all accounts well conceived and brilliantly executed; and the 5th South African Infantry Brigade was practically destroyed.

After these reverses, General Norrie decided to rally the armoured brigades in a central position north of the Trigh el Abd while the 1st South African Infantry Brigade retired to Taib el Esem to watch the western flank.

Thus ended the blackest day so far for 30th Corps.

The total of tanks left in action by nightfall was seventy—excluding a few strays—less than one-sixth of the number which had gone into battle. But the effect of stubborn gallantry in defence must not be overlooked. The Germans had seventy tanks destroyed or disabled during that day, and were left with barely eighty fit for action. 'The moral and tactical advantage,' says Liddell Hart, 'was very great for the moment, but when it passed the loss of material would be decisive. For the Germans had no such reserve of tanks as the British could feed into the battle.'<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the 6th New Zealand Brigade (of 13th Corps) coming along the Trigh Capuzzo from the east, having begun their day by capturing Cruewell's Headquarters, had climbed the escarpment and, supported by a squadron of the 8th Royal Tank Regiment, stormed and taken Point 175 on the ridge only five miles from the Sidi Rezegh airfield. The forward battalion of the brigade then ran into some of Cruewell's tanks emerging from the havoc of the armoured battle, beat off their assault and—when 30th Corps withdrew—pulled out in good order and rejoined the rest of the brigade. General Freyberg and the main body of his division, leaving one brigade watching Bardia and Halfaya, captured Gambut airfield during the afternoon, and pressed on through the night to join the 6th Brigade at Point 175.

This advance was the day's redeeming feature, but it left the New Zealand Division dangerously exposed. It was only part of the price that had to be paid by Eighth Army for the failure and misfortunes of the past five days. Nearly all the armour was out of action. Tobruk was still isolated. There could now be no evasion of sombre realities. There were three questions to be answered as the swift, cold darkness enveloped the Western Desert on the night of Sunday, November 23: how could Cunningham extricate himself from his plight, what help and support (if any) could Auchinleck give him to retrieve the situation, and what would Rommel do next?

\* \* \*

It must be admitted that, on the British side, comprehension of the

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 125.

truth, and of its gravity, was—considering the speed and the fluidity of the battle—slow and stumbling. There was certainly no wilful attempt to deceive; no facts that were known were withheld or distorted. But an optimism which was founded on brave and high hopes, which was in itself a sustaining if not always a battle-winning trait, persisted long after the hopes had been shown to be dupes.

What kind of situation reports were they from the battle area which could lead Auchinleck to send the succession of telegrams to London which Churchill later quoted with such chilling effect?

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*22 November 1941*

Prospects of achieving our immediate object, namely the destruction of the German armoured forces, seem good.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*22 November 1941*

Spirit and dash shown by commanders and troops have been remarkable. In my opinion Cunningham has so far fought this extremely complicated battle with great skill and daring. . . . I think much depends on whether a substantial proportion of tanks of the 15th German Armoured Division took part with the 21st Armoured Division in the armoured battles of the last four days, or whether this division is still more or less intact. I hope for the first, but cannot yet be certain.

It was no wonder that the Prime Minister, whose appetite for news had by no means been satisfied, signalled back early on the Sunday morning:

Most grateful for your appreciation which I realize is given under necessary reserve. Personally I like the look of things and share your confidence. Prolongation of battle must wear down enemy with his limited resources. I shall not broadcast Sunday night as decision is not immediately in sight. I have sent an epitome of your last message to President. Remember I am waiting moment to appeal to President to tell Vichy France it is now or never and to make boldest offer for aid in French North Africa from U.S.A. and Britain. I hope this moment may come within next week.

I think I will tell troops, 'Enthusiasm for magnificent fighting and manœuvres of Desert Army rising high here at home and throughout Empire. Your countrymen and comrades in British

Army, R.A.F. and Royal Navy are watching from hour to hour. We are sure you will shake the life out of the enemy in this famous battle.'

\* \* \*

During the opening phases of 'Crusader' General Cunningham had been severely handicapped by his lack of information and by his consequent inability to influence the course of events. At last, on November 22, news began to come through, in plenty, to his advanced Headquarters at Maddalena. By nightfall some comprehension at least of the realities of the situation was possible. Cunningham was gravely concerned.

The strain to which he was to be subjected during the next forty-eight hours was extreme. It would have borne heavily upon a man at the peak of physical fitness. It is beyond question that, before 'Crusader' began, Cunningham and everyone else believed that he was at such a peak. He was in his fifty-fifth year, lithe, alert and keen-witted. He was, however, an exceptionally heavy smoker. About a month before the offensive, he consulted an ophthalmologist, who found a scotoma<sup>1</sup> affecting the right eye. He was advised to stop smoking, and took the advice. The effect upon his nervous system must be considered a relevant factor.

At half past six on the morning of Sunday, November 23, Cunningham set out, in the teeth of a bitter desert wind, on the thirty-five-mile journey to the Headquarters of General Godwin-Austen, the Commander of 13th Corps. He had decided on a drastic revision of what remained of the 'Crusader' plan. He intended to put under Godwin-Austen's control all infantry operations against the enemy investing Tobruk, while Norrie with 30th Corps was to 'continue the destruction of enemy armoured forces, give 13th Corps any assistance required in its operations against Tobruk and . . . protect the left flank of 13th Corps and also the supply lines of communications'.<sup>2</sup>

Whether these intentions would have worked out in practice became very rapidly of little more than academic interest, for by the time the Army Commander returned to his own Headquarters the news was even graver than it had been the night before. He was told that 7th Armoured Brigade had no tanks in running order, and that 22nd Armoured Brigade were down to thirty. Pessimism as profound as the earlier optimism had been soaring now reigned; it

<sup>1</sup> Obscuration of part of the field of vision.

<sup>2</sup> *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 284.



was only a little less illusory. 4th Armoured Brigade were left out of account altogether, and Cunningham was told that the situation on 30th Corps's front was 'still very confused'.<sup>1</sup>

Cunningham's B.G.S. was a Scotsman, outspoken, decisive in manner and fearless; his name was Brigadier (later Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander) Galloway. Earlier in the year he had been B.G.S. to General Wilson in Greece. During this Sunday he telephoned to Brigadier Whiteley at G.H.Q. in Cairo and said that it was urgently necessary that someone should come up at once.

General Cunningham saw himself faced by the problem of the disappearance of all the armour which he possessed. He thereupon sent an urgent request to the Commander-in-Chief to fly up at once. Auchinleck's reaction, it has been argued, was hastened by the discovery that 'the optimistic earlier reports of the damage inflicted on the enemy's armoured forces were not borne out by the latest news'. It was instantaneous. Only considerations of the greatest gravity could have induced the Army Commander to request him forthwith to abandon his concerns and responsibilities as C.-in-C. Accompanied by Air Marshal Tedder he went up immediately.

It was evening when they reached Maddalena. There was preserved a contemporary note of the conversation between Auchinleck and Cunningham, at which Galloway was present. It read:

G.O.C.-in-C. Eighth Army told C.-in-C. that as a result of our losses in cruisers and American tanks during the past five days, the enemy was now probably superior to us in fast tanks which enabled him to attack and overrun our infantry without interference from our tanks.

This gave rise to a situation in which it might be possible to turn the southern flank of our forces in the Sidi Rezegh area and cut them off from their base. As the Army Commander had by this time practically nothing in reserve, this meant that there might be nothing to oppose an enemy advance into Egypt.

In these circumstances General Cunningham had thought it his duty to ask the C.-in-C. to visit his H.Q. so that he might learn the situation at first hand, and decide whether it was necessary to break off the battle and adopt a defensive attitude or continue the offensive with the object of destroying the German armoured forces. The Army Commander pointed out that a continuation

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The C.-in-C. replied that he had no doubt whatever that our only course was to continue our offensive with every means at our disposal, and that he wished the Army Commander to act accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck's own account of his decision and of the mood and motives underlying it is succinct:

I was in no doubt myself at any time as to the right course, and at once instructed General Cunningham to continue his offensive with the object of recapturing Sidi Rezegh and joining hands with the Tobruk garrison. It looked as if the enemy was hard pressed and stretched to the limit, and this was borne out by his behaviour at this period of the battle: he was thrusting here, there and everywhere in what seemed to me a desperate effort to throw us off our balance, create chaos in our ranks, and so pave the way for regaining the initiative. The enemy, it is true, had temporarily succeeded in seizing the local tactical initiative, but the strategical initiative remained with us: we were attacking, he was defending. This general initiative it was at all costs essential to retain.<sup>2</sup>

Galloway described the scene from memory, some years later:

The atmosphere of course was depressing, since C. made it clear that he thought the battle was lost and laid much emphasis upon the necessity of getting out of the area and back to where it would be possible to save Egypt. A. was at his best. . . . It was his 'finest hour' so far as my experience goes. . . . If I were writing this phase I would say that, even if it might have been better to execute a limited withdrawal, nevertheless in the circumstances at the time, A. acted as a true commander could and should . . . it is a pity that students should feel that A. was less than really great on this occasion.<sup>3</sup>

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Churchill's verdict, pondering the episode far away and after the passage of time and the chances of war had wrought many changes, was: 'By his personal action Auchinleck thus saved the battle and proved his outstanding qualities as a leader in the field.'<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

A man and a leader of men stands to be judged, in the perspective of history, by his career as a whole, by his moments of moral and spiritual grandeur as well as by his failings and failures. This was an epoch to test men's souls to the final extremity. The full portrait of any man who held great and arduous responsibilities throughout it cannot be simple or shadeless. This is true of Winston Churchill; it is no less true of the commanders who had the extraordinary and complex experience of serving under his direction and control.

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 505.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Two Momentous Decisions

THERE was to be no retreat; the offensive must continue. Auchinleck and Tedder remained at Maddalena overnight. Cunningham drafted orders which were intended to comply fully with the instructions which he had been given. These went out in the course of the night; their intention was to get his two corps regrouped and operating in close connexion with one another. After the eventful and bloody day which had passed there was, however, little time to put them into practice. Formations had leaguered where they were at dusk. Transport, stores, maintenance and headquarters were mixed up with scraps and odds and ends of fighting units. There was fatigue and there was still a great deal of confusion about what the enemy would do next.

Rommel, as Auchinleck had realized, had the temporary, tactical initiative, but strategically he was still at a grave disadvantage. The military soundness, as well as the psychological stoutness of this appreciation was to be promptly and convincingly demonstrated. It was entirely characteristic of Rommel that he reacted with tactical audacity, but in reckless disregard of his strategical risks. His whereabouts throughout Sunday, November 23 are unknown—he was always extremely mobile and he could not resist a scrap—and there is a theory that he spent part of the afternoon organizing the defence against the New Zealanders' attack on Point 175. There is also a recollection by one of his staff that he turned up at his Headquarters in the evening, highly jubilant, full of news of a great victory and announcing an immediate pursuit. He wrote to his wife that night:

Dearest Lu,

The battle seems to have passed its crisis. I'm very well, in good humour and full of confidence. Two hundred enemy tanks shot up so far. Our fronts have held.<sup>1</sup>

He then sent out some battle orders, and in the small hours of

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 162.



Monday morning he told his Operations Chief, Colonel Westphal:

The task is now to complete the destruction of the remnants of the enemy and cut their lines of withdrawal into Egypt. I shall therefore put myself at the head of the Afrika Korps with the Ariete Division under my command and begin the pursuit. I shall probably be away from my battle Headquarters until the evening of November 24 or until the morning of November 25 at the latest.

What was his intention? Auchinleck in his despatch described Rommel's orders and actions of the following forty-eight hours as a 'counter-stroke'. He intended something far more ambitious, however. As the South African Official History put it, 'He had set his hopes on a spectacular *coup* which would finish the campaign with a single stroke.'<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to believe that Rommel gave himself, his subordinate commanders or his forces any sleep or rest that night of November 23 or far into the next day.

His intention was to drive hard and fast, with as much armour as he could collect, through and beyond the battered, scattered bits and pieces of Eighth Army, into their rear area and lines of communication. He therefore assembled, under his personal command, as quickly as he possibly could, 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions and the Ariete Division, and headed eastward in what came to be known as 'Rommel's dash for the Wire'.

'Speed,' he told Cruewell, when they met at about seven o'clock on the morning of November 24, 'is vital.' He was impatient to be off soon after daybreak. But it took time to regroup and reorganize, somewhere between Sidi Rezegh and Bir el Gubi, the battered and weary panzer divisions. Before eleven o'clock Rommel was fuming, and ordered one regiment to move off 'at full speed after the enemy', even though the battle group to which it belonged was not fully assembled.

A not unimportant and very ironic aspect of this whole episode was that Rommel was convinced that he was about to pursue a fleeing army. Eighth Army, though bewildered and conscious of having been mauled, was then not thinking of flight. The flight, such as it was, must be regarded as a consequence, rather than the cause, of Rommel's ride. As will be seen, it had its hilarious as well as its disquieting aspects.

It was midday before the Axis tank columns, with Rommel in the

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 283.

forefront, leading 21st Panzer Division, set off from Bir el Gubi along the El Abd track, on what General Bayerlein (it is possible to detect a faint note of disapproval in his normally colourless sentences) described as the 'long desert trek towards Sidi Omar, which they reached in the evening after a wild drive in complete disregard of the British threat to their flanks'.<sup>1</sup>

The dash to the Wire was, as Desmond Young said, 'a bold plan to have concocted in the middle of a hard-fought battle'.<sup>2</sup> But it was based on a limited comprehension of the situation and a serious misunderstanding of the opposing Commander-in-Chief. It was true that as Rommel charged eastward—it was General Norrie who, somewhat caustically, described some of the consequences of his drive as 'the Matruh Stakes'—he caused considerable havoc in rearward areas and headquarters. The route which he had chosen lay, either by design or by a mordant freak of chance, straight through a remarkable number of headquarters—30th Corps, 7th Armoured Division, 1st South African Division, 7th Support Group and 7th Armoured Brigade—the personnel of which, after the strenuous times they had been having, 'were basking in the sunlight, and rejoicing in the peace and serenity of their surroundings'. Into these happy little oases there suddenly roared the whole might (or such of it as Rommel had gathered together) of the Afrika Korps, with 'the disruptive violence of a well-armed cat among the pigeons'. There was a mad scurry to the vehicles, which streamed as fast and as hard as possible across the desert. One officer—according to Eighth Army legend—was stripped for a wash when the tocsin sounded, and had just time to fling his sponge and basin into his car and drive off stark naked.<sup>3</sup> It was also alleged that more than one truck-driver never took his foot off the accelerator until he was within sight of the outskirts of Cairo.

The narrow squeak of the Army Commander himself—though this was one of the hazards of desert war, as was ruefully discovered by senior officers on both sides—could not be taken so light-heartedly. At eleven o'clock on the morning of November 24, General Cunningham arrived at 30th Corps Advanced Headquarters by Blenheim and was motored thence some seven miles to 7th Armoured Divisional Headquarters on the Sidi Rezegh–Gabr Saleh road, to have a conference with Generals Norrie and Gott. The conference broke up abruptly when it was reported that Rommel was 'charging around like a ruddy bull in a china shop, with three or four panzer

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> *The Happy Hunted* by Brig. G. H. Clifton, p. 133.

columns'<sup>1</sup> only a few miles to the west, and was heading eastwards as fast as he could come. Brigadier Clifton's account continued:

At that moment all three Generals appeared and mine said, 'Get General Cunningham off in his Blenheim at once!' No time to worry about springs, I drove my precious Ford utility full speed for the landing-ground in a run more crazy than any gazelle hunt. . . . We dodged through the thickening mob of runaways, which hurtled across our course, urged on by occasional shell bursts or bouncing tracer. Very fortunately I knew that particular desert area almost bush by bush because, between speed, dust, and crossing vehicles, navigation was impossible. More by good luck than judgment, we hurtled down the strip to where the Blenheim was revved up, raring to go. The Army Commander and his staff officer climbed aboard, and off she bumped, clearing a crossing three-tonner by inches!

'In the circumstances,' remarks the South African Official History austere, 'General Cunningham's judgment of the situation could not fail to be tinged by a very natural degree of uneasiness.'

\* \* \*

The excitements which prevailed along the Trigh el Abd during the morning of November 24 did not reach Maddalena. There, while Cunningham was away on his entirely proper, if rudely interrupted, visit to 30th Corps, the Commander-in-Chief spent a quiet, busy morning drafting a detailed directive on the future conduct of operations by Eighth Army. He gave it to Cunningham when the latter returned to his headquarters about noon. They went to Brigadier Galloway's caravan to discuss it. It read:

1. Having discussed the situation with you and learned from you the weak state to which 7th Armoured Division has been reduced by the past five days' fighting, I fully realize that to continue our offensive may result in the immobilization, temporarily at any rate, of all our cruiser and American M3 tanks.

2. I realize also that should, as a result of our continued offensive, the enemy be left with a superiority of fast moving tanks, there is a risk that he may try to outflank our advanced formations in the Sidi Rezegh-Gambut area and cut them off from their bases in Egypt. I realize also that in this event, there

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 131.

would remain only very weak forces to oppose an enemy advance into Egypt. On the other hand, it is clear to me that after the fighting of the last few days, it is most improbable that the enemy will be able to stage a major advance for some time to come.

3. There are only two courses open to us:

(i) To break off the battle and stand on the defensive either on the line Gambut-Gabr Saleh or on the frontier. This is a possible solution as it is unlikely that the enemy would be able to mount a strong offensive against us for many weeks and would enable us to retain much of the ground we have gained, including valuable forward landing grounds. On the other hand it would be counted as an Axis triumph and would entail abandoning for an indefinite time the relief of Tobruk.

(ii) The second course is to continue to press our offensive with every means in our power.

There is no possible doubt that the second is the right and only course. The risks involved in it must be accepted.

4. You will therefore:

(i) Continue to attack the enemy relentlessly using all your resources even to the last tank.

(ii) Your main immediate object will be as always to destroy the enemy tank forces.

(iii) Your ultimate object remains the conquest of Cyrenaica and then an advance on Tripoli.

5. To achieve the objects set out in para. 4 it seems essential that you should:

(i) Recapture the Sidi Rezegh-Duda ridge at the earliest possible moment and join hands with Tobruk garrison. It is to my mind essential that the Tobruk garrison should co-operate to the utmost limit of their resources in this operation.

(ii) Direct the Oasis Force at the *earliest possible moment* against the coast road to stop all traffic on it and if possible capture Jedbaya<sup>1</sup> or Benina, neither of which is strongly held apparently.

(iii) Use the Long Range Desert Group patrols offensively to the limit of their endurance against every possible objective on the enemy lines of communication from Mechili to Benghazi, Jedbaya and beyond to the west. All available armoured cars should be used with the utmost boldness to take part in this offensive. The advantages to be gained by a determined effort against the enemy lines of communication are worth immense risks which will be taken.

<sup>1</sup> Much better known as Agedabia.

Auchinleck stated in his despatch:

General Cunningham received my decision loyally and at once issued his orders to give effect to it. I was, however, somewhat disturbed by what seemed to be excessive anxiety on his part lest the enemy should break through in force to our rear areas, and dislocate our vulnerable supply and repair organization east of the frontier. His anxiety undoubtedly grew when the enemy swiftly followed up his recent success by a powerful counter-stroke with that very intention, thrusting eastwards on November 24 with his armoured divisions to the frontier and beyond. I thought, however, that, after discussing the situation with me and hearing that I was determined to continue the offensive, he would feel himself capable of giving effect to my decision whole-heartedly. I therefore returned to Cairo on November 25.

Galloway commented: 'A. was at his best. He informed C. quite emphatically that it was not his business to consider Egypt's safety, but to get on with the battle.'

Before his return to Egypt the Commander-in-Chief discussed the situation again with Cunningham. Throughout the day he had pondered Rommel's somewhat erratic moves, he had reached his own estimate of his opponent's tank losses and of the insoluble problems in supply, maintenance and organization which the German had set himself, and had come to the conclusion that the dash to the Wire<sup>1</sup> had no strategic significance and provided no serious danger to the Eighth Army. But the Gambut-Bardia zone, which had been the Panzergruppe's concentration area, was now threatened by the advance of the New Zealand Division, and Rommel himself had opened the way for a decisive blow at the heart of his dispositions around Tobruk. He was completely resolute in his decision that the New Zealand Division should press on, regardless of events elsewhere, leaving a minimum force with 4th Indian Division to mislead the enemy and ensure security.

It happened that the two Commanders-in-Chief were both, on that Monday evening, conferring and planning within thirty miles of one another—Auchinleck at Maddalena, Rommel at Bir Shefer-

<sup>1</sup> General Cunningham, flying back to Maddalena that afternoon from a visit to 13th Corps H.Q., had crossed the Trigh el Abd and had seen three large armoured columns moving parallel eastwards from Gabr Saleh. At a quarter past four he issued orders for the protection of Railhead and of Army H.Q.; and, as the South African Official History pointedly observes, for once A.A. guns were regarded as available for anti-tank defence.

zen, at the eastern end of the Trigh el Abd. One severe blow which Rommel could have inflicted on Eighth Army—the destruction of two large British supply dumps in the desert south-east of the Trigh el Abd—was never delivered, because (although each of the dumps was six miles square) the Germans never knew they were there. But Rommel that evening was bursting with confidence, full of large, swift, eager plans. He had in fact got himself and his forces into something of a muddle, but he was in no mood to admit it. He was still bent upon the immediate annihilation of Eighth Army. In spite of the helter-skelter of the various headquarters which he had so greatly disturbed in his wild drive, he knew that he had not yet accomplished this. He was near the Frontier Wire, but not yet across it. His attention was now riveted on 13th Corps, whom hitherto he had virtually ignored: 4th Indian Division in the region of the Omars and the New Zealand Division west of Sollum. They must be bottled up, destroyed, driven against the minefields on the Sollum front and compelled to surrender.

He hustled von Ravenstein northwards to Halfaya, even before the main body of his division had arrived, and told him, 'You have the chance of ending this campaign tonight!'

It must have been a disorderly conference. Von Ravenstein was sent off at once; Cruewell turned up an hour later, put forward an alternative plan and was brusquely overruled. At about five o'clock, in the last of the daylight, Cruewell departed to see von Ravenstein, and Rommel went to 21st Panzer Division 'and personally put them at the Halfaya Pass'.<sup>1</sup> He was accompanied by Major-General Gause, his Chief of Staff. On his way back from this errand, his staff car broke down. Bayerlein's account of this incident, though funny, contained a certain undertone of criticism:

It was pure luck that as dusk was falling, the Afrika Korps's Mammoth, containing General Cruewell and his battle staff,<sup>2</sup> came by. 'Give us a lift,' said Rommel, who, with Gause, was shivering with cold. The Mammoth, now carrying all the most senior officers of the Panzer Group, drove on to the wire fence. Unfortunately, no way through it could be found, and it was impossible to make one. Finally, Rommel grew impatient. 'I'll take over myself,' he said, and dismissed the A.D.C., who had been directing the vehicle up till then. But this time even Rommel's

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 164.

<sup>2</sup> The Mammoth was a captured British vehicle, for which the Germans cherished a great affection. Bayerlein was one of the battle staff.

legendary sense of direction did not help.<sup>1</sup> To make matters worse they were in an area completely dominated by the enemy. Indian despatch riders buzzed to and fro past the Mammoth, British tanks moved up forward and American-built lorries ground their way through the desert. None of them had any suspicion that the highest officers of the German-Italian Panzer Group were sitting in a captured command vehicle, often only two or three yards away. The ten officers and five men spent a restless night.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

Auchinleck's activities that afternoon and evening were of a different order. He telegraphed to the Prime Minister:

On arrival I found Cunningham perturbed at the situation, owing to the very small number of tanks reported still in running order. Apparently five days' continuous fighting and manœuvring resulted in considerable disorganization and losses from enemy action and mechanical breakdowns in our armoured division. There are sure to be reasons for this, but they do not matter now. . . . In his attack yesterday evening the enemy used Italian tanks, which I take as evidence that he is running short of his own. I am convinced that he is fully stretched and desperate, and that we must go on pressing him relentlessly. We may immobilize temporarily at least practically all our tanks in the process, but that does not matter if we destroy all his. The fact that he has abandoned Sidi Omar and Sollum garrisons to their fate and that we have already taken over three thousand prisoners, including a thousand Germans . . . is significant. I have accordingly ordered General Cunningham to attack with all available resources, regain Sidi Rezegh, and join hands with Tobruk garrison, which is to co-operate by attacking the enemy on its front. Commanders and troops in great heart, and New Zealand Division is concentrated in front of Sidi Rezegh with Infantry tanks. The enemy is fighting desperately, but we always expected that.

Having to the best of his considerable abilities thus put the affairs of Eighth Army in order, Auchinleck strolled across for a talk and a drink with Air Vice-Marshal Coningham (A.O.C., the Western Desert) in his caravan. While he was there Captain Randolph

<sup>1</sup> 'Banging fruitlessly against the Wire like a bewildered bee on a window-pane', is the South African Official History's description of this episode.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 164.

Churchill, the Prime Minister's son,<sup>1</sup> came in, accompanied by Miss Eve Curie,<sup>2</sup> who was a war correspondent. Miss Curie, in her record of this encounter (it must have happened just about the time that Rommel was thumbing a lift in 13th Corps's rear area), described Auchinleck as 'a strong, sunburned man with light-brown hair and blue eyes', and added that his presence 'rendered Randolph Churchill for once absolutely mute and motionless'. The conversation flagged. Auchinleck thought about the job in hand, and sipped his drink. Miss Curie brooded, far from cheerfully, on 'the German tanks which had obliged us to pack our bags so suddenly'.<sup>3</sup> The theme of Captain Churchill's meditations is unknown. It was Auchinleck who broke the silence.

'He is making a desperate effort,' he said, 'but he won't get very far. That column of tanks simply cannot get supplies. I am sure of this.'

The way in which he said, 'I am sure of this', gave Miss Curie 'a great tranquillity'.

Others, more important and more responsible than Miss Curie, had been in dire need of having their confidence restored, their bewilderment smoothed out and their morale strengthened. Auchinleck had accomplished a great deal in his twenty-four hours in the forward areas; but had he done enough?

This was the question he asked himself in the aircraft on the way back to Cairo on November 25.

When he reached G.H.Q., he was given this telegram from the Prime Minister, in answer to his of the previous night:

I cordially endorse your views and intentions and H.M. Government wish to share your responsibility for fighting it out to the last inch whatever may be the result. It is all or nothing but I am sure you are the stronger and will win.

You have no doubt had my message about the rest of the 1st Armoured Division landing Suez today. Ram it in if useful at earliest without regard for future. Close grip upon the enemy by all units will choke the life out of him.

Am immensely heartened by your magnificent spirit and will-power. Say bravo to Tedder and R.A.F. on air mastery. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Capt. Churchill had gone overseas with the Commandos and was then serving in the Western Desert.

<sup>2</sup> Daughter of the famous French scientists, Marie and Pierre Curie.

<sup>3</sup> *Journey Among Warriors* by Eve Curie, p. 52. The war correspondents were considerably put about during that day; cf. *African Trilogy* by Alan Moorehead, p. 227.



## AUCHINLECK

Please burn all special stuff and flimsies up at the front.

Timely, generous and heartening as this message was, and characteristic of Churchill at his finest, it did not solve Auchinleck's immediate problem. The more he reflected, the more he wondered. He said in his despatch:

While at the Headquarters of the Eighth Army, I had discussed the situation exhaustively with Air Marshal Tedder and found that he too had grave misgivings about the direction of the Eighth Army in the circumstances then obtaining. After returning to Cairo, I again gave the whole question most anxious consideration and concluded that, in so critical a situation, I could not retain in the field a commander in whose ability to carry out my intentions I had not complete confidence.

Having made up his mind, Auchinleck acted with the utmost speed and firmness. He wrote at once to General Cunningham:

With the greatest regret I have to tell you that, after the most anxious consideration, I have decided that I must relieve you of the Command of the Eighth Army.

During my recent visit to your Advanced Headquarters, you asked me to give you a decision as to whether we should continue an offensive against the enemy in Libya, or abandon it. After due consideration of the reasons for and against each course, I gave my decision that an offensive must be pressed relentlessly, regardless of loss.

You loyally accepted this decision and at once gave orders to give effect to it.

I have formed the opinion, however, that you are now thinking in terms of defence rather than of offence, and I have lost confidence in your ability to press to the bitter end the offensive which I have ordered to continue.

I have decided, therefore, to replace you as Commander of the Eighth Army by Acting/Lieutenant-General N. M. Ritchie. I request you to hand over your command to him on receipt of this letter.

You will realize, I hope, that this is an extremely painful decision for me to make. It is all the more painful because I realize that I owe you a deep debt of gratitude for your conduct of the battle up to this moment.

## TWO MOMENTOUS DECISIONS

This official communication was accompanied by a personal letter. Painful as it was, this was not the last or the worst blow that Auchinleck was called upon to inflict or to bear during these months.

My dear Alan,

This letter accompanies my official letter to you telling you that I have decided to relieve you of your Command.

It is no use, I am afraid, my telling you how I hate to have had to do this thing, but I must act according to my belief and I have done so. It is most painful to me because I like and respect you a very great deal, and I never thought that I should have to act in this way towards you. I can only assure you that I do so because I honestly feel that it is necessary to ensure the total defeat of the enemy in the shortest possible time.

As I have said in my official letter, I have nothing but admiration and gratitude for the way in which you have planned and conducted the operations up to date.

You will realize, I am sure, that it is most important for the success of the campaign in Libya and for the winning of the war as a whole, that it should not become public property that you have been superseded in your command. I realize that this supersession must be a most bitter blow to you, and that I am not entitled to ask favours of you. In the public interest, however, I do ask you to agree to being placed on the sick list and to go into hospital for a period. I know that this will be against all your instincts, and that you will hate doing it. All the same, I think you should agree to this suggestion of mine, and if I may say so, I think the strain under which you have been working for the last three months, and the last few days in particular, does provide justification for a rest.

You may not believe me when I tell you that I have nothing but sympathy for you, but it is true all the same. I feel my responsibility very deeply.

These two letters went up to Maddalena next morning by the hand of General Arthur Smith, Auchinleck's C.G.S.

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Having resolved to dismiss Cunningham, Auchinleck was faced immediately with the no less difficult question of his successor. His decisions were communicated in two telegrams to London, both of which went out late that night.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*25 November 1941*

I got back this afternoon from Advanced H.Q. Eighth Army. As result my two days' visit am convinced Cunningham no longer fit to conduct intensive offensive required. In consequence after exhaustive consideration have ordered him hand over command to Ritchie from November 26. Am making Ritchie local Lieutenant-General for this purpose. Request your approval. This decision does not mean that operations have been mishandled up to date or that their successful issue has been in any way prejudiced. Cunningham most loyal but in my opinion has lost spirit of offensive and consequently I have lost confidence in him. Would have referred matter to you first but every hour counts at the moment.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister.*

*25 November 1941*

Thank you most sincerely for your telegram which I appreciate greatly.

Have just returned from H.Q. Eighth Army. Issue of battle is still in balance but I am convinced that we have only to persist to win. Enemy is thrusting here, there and everywhere in desperate attempt to throw us off our balance, disorganize our command and cause chaos in our ranks. He is showing great skill and determination. All the same he has little behind his effort and so far from all I have seen and heard has failed completely to shake the morale of our commanders and troops who are fighting magnificently.

The enemy is trying desperately to regain the initiative. In this he has succeeded in part, but locally and temporarily only. So long as we can maintain our pressure towards Tobruk the real initiative is ours and we can disregard diversions towards Sollum or Maddalena or even farther east, temporarily inconvenient and unpleasant as these may be. Every effort is being devoted to the forwarding of the offensive by the New Zealand Division and other troops of 13th Corps towards Tobruk and I believe it is going well. While in the forward area I heard of no one who was not sure that we are going to win. There may be disquieting episodes but the general situation should remain greatly in our favour.

I have telegraphed to C.I.G.S. to say that I have decided to replace General Cunningham temporarily by General Ritchie, my present D.C.G.S. This is not on account of any misgiving as to present situation in my mind but because I have reluctantly concluded that Cunningham, admirable as he has been up to date,

has now begun to think defensively instead of offensively, mainly because of our large tank losses. Before taking this drastic step I gave matter prolonged and anxious consideration and consulted Minister of State on my return here this afternoon. I am convinced I am right though I realize undesirability of such a step at present moment on general grounds. I will try and minimize publicity as much as possible.

Meanwhile we are making every effort to replace losses of tanks and armoured cars and Eighth Army are organizing defences against enemy raids in our back areas such as Sidi Omar, Maddalena and Railhead.

At same time our light forces to southward have been ordered to press forward relentlessly towards enemy line of communication Mechili-Benghazi-El Agheila and interrupt traffic thereon.

Have made certain personally that every possible precaution is being taken in regard to your special stuff, importance of which is fully realized by all concerned.

Am very much alive to importance of early employment of 1st Armoured Division and this is receiving my urgent personal attention. Will cable details later. . . .

He sent a second telegram to Churchill, which was, as he claimed, not without interest.

Before leaving Eighth Army H.Q. I issued following message to General Cunningham, for wide distribution to troops. It may interest you.

'During three days at your Advance H.Q. I have seen and heard enough to convince me, though I did not need convincing, that the determination to beat the enemy of your commanders and troops could not be greater and I have no doubt whatever that he will be beaten. His position is desperate and he is trying by lashing out in all directions to distract us from our object, which is to destroy him utterly. We will not be distracted and he will be destroyed. You have got your teeth into him. Hang on and bite deeper and deeper, and hang on till he is finished. Give him no rest. The general situation in North Africa is excellent. There is only one order: ATTACK AND PURSUE. All out everyone.'

These telegrams reached London on Wednesday, November 26. It was not, as General Kennedy remembered it, a good day. But Churchill's reaction was generous, swift and sure.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

26 November 1941

You can of course count upon my approval and support in what you have done. We admire the tenacity of you and your troops in this great battle and pray for your success.

Auchinleck's consultation with Oliver Lyttelton (which he mentioned in his first telegram to the Prime Minister) and Lyttelton's staunch support of his decision were of importance.

*Prime Minister to Minister of State*

26 November 1941

General Auchinleck's authority over all commanders is supreme, and all his decisions during the battle will be confirmed by us. Your action and attitude highly approved. Communicate to General Auchinleck.

Auchinleck's decision to appoint Ritchie as Cunningham's successor was a temporary one, made under pressure of the exigencies of the hour. But the word 'temporary' must be seen in its context; the implications and the consequences of the decision—not least its transformation from a momentary expedient into a permanent association—are an integral part of the story of the next few months, and can only be considered as they emerge.

Was Ritchie, however, the only officer who could have been appointed at that instant? Auchinleck had already, in the elementary planning of the autumn offensive, rejected Wilson. Of the two corps commanders in the field, Norrie, stout-hearted though he was, could hardly be regarded, in the light of what had happened in the past week, as a candidate for higher command; and Godwin-Austen was in the middle of the battle. To transfer him now could only be risky and might be disastrous. Of the divisional commanders, Gott of 7th Armoured Division, Scobie in Tobruk, Freyberg and Messervy on what Rommel called the Sollum-Bardia front, were all similarly committed. Several brigadiers—Jock Campbell, Galloway and Gatehouse particularly—had all shown great soldierly qualities in the chequered course of 'Crusader'; but they were all relatively junior, and open to the same objection as that which was levelled, with some force, at Ritchie: that of never having previously commanded a higher formation in battle. Major-General (later General Sir Neil) Ritchie, by origin an officer of the Black Watch, had indeed commanded the 51st Highland Division in 1940-1; he had been B.G.S. to Alan Brooke in the B.E.F., and (as has been seen) B.G.S. to Auchinleck in Southern Command in 1940. He had also served under Wavell and Dill in Palestine during

the Arab Rebellion. He was at this time forty-four years old, tall, handsome, vigorous and of a sturdy, resilient temperament. As D.C.G.S. in G.H.Q. in Cairo he had been very close to Auchinleck during the arduous period of planning and preparation for 'Crusader'. He knew the operation thoroughly; even more important, he knew and had identified his own mental processes to a remarkable degree with Auchinleck's. He was by no means the obvious choice as a temporary replacement in a critical moment; but he looked to be sound.

He went up to Maddalena on the afternoon of November 26, some hours after Arthur Smith, and took over immediately. Cunningham bore the blow with fortitude and dignity, and went at once into hospital in Alexandria. He flew back to the United Kingdom early in December.<sup>1</sup>

His dismissal had been an intensely painful step for Auchinleck to take, made no less painful by the fact that the Commander of Eighth Army was the brother of the naval C.-in-C. He told Admiral Cunningham privately. The Admiral replied at once:

My dear General,

I am very grateful to you for writing to me.

Naturally I am most distressed about Alan but you must undoubtedly do what you think is the right thing and he will I am sure accept it in a right spirit. . . .

The W.D. battle seems to be going more in our favour, we are straining every nerve to cut the petrol and oil supplies. . . .

Best wishes for the success I am sure is coming and thank you for being so frank with me.

Winston Churchill's considered comment, many years later, was: 'I particularly admired General Auchinleck's conduct in rising superior to all personal considerations and to all temptations to compromise or delay action.'<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

Another alternative to the appointment of Ritchie was strongly canvassed then and subsequently. This was that Auchinleck himself should assume operational command of Eighth Army. The idea originated in the highest circles in the United Kingdom.

<sup>1</sup> General Cunningham subsequently held, with distinction, a number of other high appointments, including that of High Commissioner and C.-in-C. Palestine, 1945-8.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 507.

Dill's term of office as C.I.G.S. was almost ended. He was still going, irregularly, to the War Office but was, according to General Kennedy, no longer taking part in the work of the Chiefs of Staff. On November 27 Kennedy suggested to him that he might speak to the Prime Minister about Auchinleck taking command himself, and this he did.

At half-past six that evening, this telegram was despatched from London:

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*27 November 1941*

C.I.G.S. and I both wonder whether as you saved battle once you should not go up again and win it now. Your presence on spot will be an inspiration to all. However this is of course entirely for you to judge.

Dill, sick and weary as he was, separated from his friend by thousands of miles, knowing that he was giving up his own great post in a day or two, yet longed to give him all the help and support that he could. The following day he looked at a copy of the Prime Minister's message, and wrote his own to supplement it.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*28 November 1941*

What I had in mind was that moment will come—in fact may already have come—when your drive and personality will be essential to reap full fruits of victory. Troops will be dog-tired, vehicles badly needing overhaul and petrol and water short. Everyone will say they cannot press on and with your drive will find they can go another hundred miles at least. Chetwode once told me how Allenby on one occasion drove him on when he was sure he had not another ounce in him.

If ever there was a soldier as great in heart as he was keen in intellect, that was Dill.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*28 November 1941*

When I realized Cunningham was not fit I considered very carefully whether I myself should take his place in command Eighth Army. After much thought I decided against this and appointed Ritchie. I realize well what hangs on this battle but concluded that I was more useful at G.H.Q. where I could see whole picture and retain proper sense of proportion. Ritchie is completely in my mind and his plans for future are exactly what I would do myself in his place. As you know I am at your service

but my honest opinion is that for me to go now and supersede Ritchie might have *bad* not *good* effect. I shall go forward to visit of course as required.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

29 November 1941

C.I.G.S. and I do not intend suggest you should in any way supersede Ritchie. What we still think would be wise is for you to visit battlefield should a new impulse be clearly needed. Coming fresh to scene with your drive and full knowledge of situation you will put new vigour into troops and inspire everyone.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

29 November 1941

Thank you very much. I quite understand and will certainly put every ounce of energy I can into maintaining momentum and in this will be ably seconded by Ritchie, who has great drive.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile there had been no cessation in the battle. It had, however, taken a new turn. From the evening of November 24 onwards it became more and more an infantry battle. Auchinleck's calm assessment of the situation, in Coningham's caravan that night, was as militarily accurate as it was psychologically reassuring. While Rommel was away on his wild and, as it turned out, almost fruitless dash to the Wire; while the scattered and shaken British armoured forces were regrouping and re-equipping themselves, the infantry slugged on and won the battle. Rommel's armour would live to fight another day, and so would 30th Corps. But there was one difference between them in the last week of November 1941. The British were within easy reach of all their sources of reinforcement and replenishment. The arrival of 1st Armoured Division was indeed, as the Prime Minister predicted and Auchinleck had agreed, extremely timely; but also there was a reserve of tanks which Eighth Army had at its disposal, and the flow of these was uninterrupted. But Rommel, with the Afrika Korps, was too far away from his supplies and his reinforcements.

Two successive decisions by Auchinleck saved the battle of Sidi Rezegh and converted the near-defeat of the first phase into the undisputed victory of the second: his order to Cunningham on the night of November 23 to continue the offensive, and his replacement of Cunningham on November 26 by an officer who—whatever limitations and defects he subsequently revealed as an Army commander—was at that time able and willing to take the bold,



aggressive action which the Commander-in-Chief knew to be necessary.

It was true that when Ritchie took over, the worst of the crisis was past. He had only to press on, and not fumble, and the result was reasonably certain. But he did press on and he did not fumble. In his second as in his first momentous decision Auchinleck was—so far as the immediate emergency was concerned—justified.

It is now necessary to consider the military effects of that first decision. First, what had happened to Rommel and his armour? Auchinleck's despatch gave an adequate and entirely fair account of the conduct and consequences of this phase of the battle, as seen from the British point of view:

The enemy tanks crossed the Frontier Wire at several points, and by November 25 parties of the enemy were scattered all over the country east of it. Twice, enemy tanks attacked the 4th Indian Division at Sidi Omar; but thanks to the staunchness and restraint of the artillery and to the skilful dispositions of General Messervy, they were driven off with heavy loss. Nevertheless the enemy captured many prisoners and reached a point nineteen miles east of Sidi Omar and within fifty miles of our railhead. They also created a stir in the Advanced Headquarters of the Eighth Army near Maddalena by moving southwards along the Frontier Wire towards it. On November 26 the enemy tanks turned north into Halfaya. Then, after an unsuccessful attack on Capuzzo and Musaid, they passed through a gap east of Sollum Barracks, which the New Zealanders had previously tried in vain to close, and entered Bardia, where they were joined by other columns from the south-east.

Part of the enemy's armoured forces did not cross the frontier, but remained to the west to do such damage as they could. The Support Group and the Guards Brigade rapidly formed mobile columns and harassed them very effectively.

On November 27 enemy tanks, based on Bardia, captured the Headquarters of 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade at Sidi Azciz. Then, after two further attacks on Capuzzo, one of which was comparatively successful, the enemy armoured forces disappeared from the frontier area. By this time most of them were already hurrying back to Sidi Rezegh in response to insistent calls for help.

On the whole the enemy thrust inflicted little material damage, and the moral effect was almost negligible as the transport and other units, which were scattered by his lightning advance, soon reassembled and reorganized themselves. Inasmuch as the New

## TWO MOMENTOUS DECISIONS

Zealand Division was able to fight through to Tobruk, which they might never have been able to do if the weight of the enemy armour had been thrown into the scale against them, the advantage rested with us. Moreover the enemy spent much of his strength and used up most of his reserves in this desperate counter-stroke. But it might have succeeded, had the 4th Indian Division shown less determination and the mobile columns less offensive spirit, or had the Royal Air Force not bombed the enemy's principal concentrations so relentlessly. Nevertheless the attempt came as a rude shock, and it was with relief that I heard on November 27 that the enemy was on his way back towards Tobruk.

The 'insistent calls for help' to which Auchinleck referred came from Rommel's Ia at his own Headquarters at El Adem, Lieutenant-Colonel Westphal, and for two vital days they went unanswered because both Rommel and Cruewell were out of wireless communication; and Panzergruppe maintained contact only with von Ravenstein, who had no more idea than Westphal of Rommel's whereabouts. Over the crucial period, November 23-25, both Auchinleck and Rommel gambled. Liddell Hart holds that Auchinleck's was the bigger gamble.<sup>1</sup> But Rommel's was the one that failed. Auchinleck was not by nature a gambler, but he was never in doubt on this issue, either at the time or later. His despatch continued:

The enemy's thrust failed in its main object of wresting from us the initiative; for, while it was in progress, the New Zealand Division and the Tobruk garrison were making fresh gains in the vital area of Sidi Rezegh, fifty miles to the westward. From Point 175 the 4th New Zealand Brigade struck north and took Zaafran without great difficulty at dawn on November 25. The same night by a skilfully planned bayonet attack they captured Belhamed. Simultaneously the 6th Brigade advanced along the ridge from Point 175 towards Sidi Rezegh. They met stiffer opposition, but by the morning of the 25th they had drawn level with the 4th Brigade on the ridge itself and on the eastern edge of the landing ground. Then the 6th Brigade made to capture Sidi Rezegh to conform with the 4th Brigade's attack on Belhamed. Although they pressed the attack with great determination and made considerable progress, they failed to dislodge the enemy from

<sup>1</sup> Commentary in *The Rommel Papers*, p. 166.

the high ground above the mosque at Sidi Rezegh. The following night, despite the heavy losses they had suffered, they reorganized and in a final spirited effort reduced this last enemy strongpoint.

At midday on November 26, the Tobruk garrison opened the long-deferred final phase of its sortie. By dusk they had captured El Duda in the face of determined resistance. That night saw the first contact between Tobruk and the Eighth Army, when General Freyberg moved his reserve battalion by the south of Belhamed to join the infantry consolidating on El Duda.

General Ritchie was now in command of Eighth Army. If in the early phases of 'Crusader' the staff at G.H.Q. in Cairo (and, many years afterwards, the historian) could justly complain about the paucity of information about the course of the battle, thereafter there was a steady and ample flow of it. Auchinleck was, as has been seen, an easy and fluent writer; Ritchie, in the early period of his command, set out to emulate his chief. His first letter was dictated only a few hours after he took over.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

*27 November 1941*

... As I see it the major situation in Cyrenaica as a whole is excellent from our point of view and all indications are that the enemy is getting more and more hard put to it.

As regards the local battlefield of the Eighth Army; this appears to me now to have developed itself into two battle areas:

(a) South-east of Tobruk, where we are effecting a junction with the garrison.

(b) The other is the area Menastir-Halfaya-Omar Aziz.

Of these two, the former is the chief to us. We must get on there for it is essential that we should ease our administrative situation by starting to run supplies from Tobruk. Progress appears to be slow but a junction has, I hear now (10.00 hours) been effected between the New Zealanders and the Tobruk garrison at El Duda. This, I hope, is the beginning of our very real success there. In the second area the situation is still very confused but I cannot afford to spend my time looking backwards towards there to the detriment of our operation forward, and this is the line I have decided to pursue.

To this end I am putting both the 5th Indian and 11th Indian Brigades under command of the 4th Indian Division once more, relieving them at once of their present roles by the 2nd South African Division and any other oddments I can find. By thus strengthening up Frank Messervy and handing to him the

complete responsibility for dealing with the enemy in the area Menastir-Halfaya-Omar, I can get on with the job ahead. . . .

Godwin-Austen is charged, as you know, with the operation to effect a junction with Tobruk and roll up all enemy now facing the Tobruk perimeter. At the moment I am concentrating the 7th Armoured Division to his south flank to ensure that no action by the Germans from the east, the south or south-west can interfere with the operations to relieve Tobruk. As soon as I see the situation sufficiently stabilized there I propose moving the 7th Armoured Division wide round to the Acroma area, where I do not think there is at present very much enemy armour; there to round up and disorganize and disrupt, so far as is possible, the Italian forces facing the south-west and western faces of the perimeter.

Once this is accomplished, which I hope should not take more than forty-eight hours, I intend to form a mobile force of all the American tanks and the equivalent of a motorized brigade group to move under Strafer Gott direct on Benghazi straight across the desert. Coningham is playing hard on this and proposes to step up approximately five fighter squadrons behind this force. This will then leave me with the New Zealand Division and one armoured brigade and one South African brigade to continue the advance towards Derna, while Gott's force is moving on Benghazi. If successful I feel that the enemy may then find himself without a base port and such forces as he had left shut in amongst the Gebel Akbar.

Meanwhile I cannot help feeling that the enemy's efforts in the Menastir-Halfaya-Omar area can be successfully dealt with by Frank Messervy, for the indications are that the enemy's radius of action from that part of the world is very limited, and I feel that we must not allow our eyes to be tied down to this battle to the detriment of the major task of destroying the whole of the enemy's forces in Cyrenaica. I have just come back, by air, from H.Q. 30th Corps, who are with H.Q. 7th Armoured Division near Point 172. Everyone in splendid fettle there and the strength of tanks in the division improving hourly. The division now consists in effect of the 4th Armoured Brigade with seventy-seven American tanks, and the 22nd Armoured Brigade with forty-five cruisers, but as each hour passes this number of A.F.V.s increases. The armoured cars are doing very well and I do not think they have lost unduly heavy casualties. . . .

Finally, everyone's spirits are at the top here, and I myself feel complete confidence in the ultimate issue.

The grasp and the firmness revealed in this letter were as important as the optimism. Whatever confusion there was about this phase of 'Crusader'—and it mounted rapidly—was now on the German side. Rommel was, as the South African Official History put it, 'required to pay the penalty for his disregard of all considerations, whether human or geographical'.<sup>1</sup> There was still plenty of fight left in him, however. Ritchie was right to concentrate on Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh; but he too, as will be seen, had to pay a price for not, as he had expressed it to Auchinleck, 'spending his time looking backwards'.

There were still considerable enemy forces to the south-east of Tobruk, who had closed in after the New Zealand battalion had passed through to El Duda. In fulfilment of Ritchie's aggressive intentions the operation of clearing them away was undertaken on November 28. Auchinleck recorded in his despatch:

With the help of tanks and armoured cars New Zealand infantry swept the valley taking numerous prisoners and much booty, while the 70th Division dislodged parties of the enemy from the edge of the escarpment between El Duda and Belhamed. The corridor now offered a safe passage, and the 13th Corps Headquarters and the administrative echelon of the New Zealand Division were able to move into Tobruk. At the same time a supply convoy from Tobruk reached the division, which by then had run very short of supplies and ammunition. Next day another convoy arrived from the 30th Corps under tank escort.

The enemy reacted immediately to the capture of El Duda, Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh, and on November 27 wireless messages for the enemy armoured divisions to return from the frontier were intercepted. Appreciating that the New Zealand Division, which had gone forward without its third brigade and which had suffered serious losses, would need help, General Ritchie ordered the 1st South African Infantry Brigade to join the 13th Corps.

Their raid to the frontier having failed—had it succeeded, Desmond Young has argued, military historians would have rated it a masterpiece—the panzer divisions now headed for home. The threatener now saw himself threatened, and fought back as hard as he could. The 7th Armoured Division, which had been reorganized and had re-emerged as a fighting formation, consisting of the Support Group and the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades, with some

<sup>1</sup> *The Sidi Rezeg Battles 1941* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 351.

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120 tanks altogether, attacked the Germans several times on their way back; but, said Auchinleck, 'far from doing the enemy sufficient damage to deter him from attacking the 13th Corps, they themselves suffered heavy losses which left them powerless to intervene effectively to save the infantry next day. Our armoured brigades could not prevail against an enemy possessing in all probability an equal number of tanks, better armoured and mounting better guns.' Gallantry—and there was never any lack of that—was in the end no match either for the armament of the panzers themselves or for the formidable eighty-eight-millimetre gun which the British tanks encountered if they tried to attack the Germans in the rear. Panzergruppe therefore got through. And on the evening of November 28 Rommel, who on November 24 had said that he would be away for one day, who had told von Ravenstein (by this time a prisoner in the hands of the New Zealanders) that he had a chance of ending the campaign that night, was back at his Headquarters. Two aircraft that had been sent to fetch him had been shot down by the R.A.F. and he arrived in a bad temper. However, by the time he had worked out his plan for the following day he was quite his normal self, and dashed off a note to his wife:

The battle seems to be developing well. The decision will probably come today. I'm full of confidence.

13th Corps in the meantime had done notably well. The way had been opened to Tobruk, a supply column had gone through the corridor. Godwin-Austen (through the proper channels of Eighth Army and G.H.Q.) had sent an historic birthday message to Winston Churchill, with which Auchinleck had ended his situation report to London: 'Corridor to Tobruk clear and secure. Tobruk is as relieved as I am.' And Churchill had replied, 'I am highly complimented by your message. 13th Corps has fought a great fight in this astounding battle.'

It was to 13th Corps that Rommel now directed all his attention. His plan was to close the ring round Tobruk once more, to which end he gathered every available formation, and put the main weight of his attack on the western flank in order to prevent the New Zealanders from pulling back into Tobruk. Desmond Young described the ensuing battle as a 'dog-fight'. He continued:

Everything turned on whether 1st Brigade of 1st South African Division could get up to the support of the New Zealanders in time. The division was new to desert war. Its 5th Brigade had been

overrun and almost completely destroyed a week earlier in a well-conceived and brilliantly executed German attack. Major-General 'Dan' Picnaar, a foxy last-war veteran, was understandably cautious about moving across country and perhaps being caught by enemy armour in the open. His advance was slow and hesitating. When 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions arrived . . . General Freyberg was unable to hold on. The New Zealanders were driven off Sidi Rezegh.<sup>1</sup>

In London the Prime Minister, whose forbearance and self-restraint during the past eventful week had been exemplary, was beginning to be hungry for news.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

30 November 1941

Although I have no news from the front later than your telegram of yesterday, I cannot help feeling that we are forging steadily ahead against a resourceful and determined foe. Thank you so much for your full accounts and for your kind good wishes.

I may have to make a statement to the House on Tuesday on information received to that date, especially if events continue to take a favourable turn. . . .

The response was immediate and detailed.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

30 November 1941

Brigadier Whiteley just back from front.

Enemy yesterday evening attacked New Zealanders from west and captured El Duda but were evicted during night by counter-attack. German infantry and 15th Panzer Division took part in this attack which was properly staged. 15th Panzer Division also attacked our armoured force yesterday but withdrew.

21st Panzer Division, believed to be still north of New Zealand Division, does not appear to have put in an attack though ordered to do so by Rommel. We believe on reliable evidence that it is too weak to attack and worried by our small mobile columns attacking it in rear.

Reported but not yet confirmed that our armoured force this afternoon engaged Ariete Division east of Sidi Rezegh and inflicted heavy casualties on it, nineteen enemy tanks being said to be seen burning.

In Bardia-Sidi Omar-Halfaya area 4th Indian Division is clearing up situation and has got in touch with 5th New Zealand

<sup>1</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, pp. 114-15.

Infantry Brigade which is believed all right including its H.Q. which had lost its wireless and so could not communicate.

Our armoured cars are moving wide south of El Adem and also patrolling between Bardia and Tobruk.

2nd South African Division is to move forward to Sidi Omar.

1st South African Brigade has not yet joined New Zealand Division Sidi Rezegh area but is expected to do so shortly.

*Summary.* Enemy attempts to encircle and destroy New Zealand Division were badly co-ordinated and have not so far succeeded. Enemy attempt to reconcentrate 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions and Ariete Division have not so far succeeded. Enemy tank strength seems definitely at low ebb while ours appears relatively good. Our infantry tanks with New Zealand Division will be most valuable in event of renewed enemy attacks. Difficult to forecast but seems possible that enemy may now try and stabilize front east of El Adem with his German infantry covered by his remaining tanks on their south flank. Plans to deal with this contingency are in hand. Alternatively he may fling everything into renewed attacks which should result in his becoming weaker than he already is. Enemy has been sending all operations orders in clear for last two days, which is significant of haste and disorganization. Nothing will make me unduly optimistic but I am absolutely confident.

Ritchie has gripped battle completely and is thinking far ahead. Our Air Force continues to do magnificently and had most successful action today.

Propose to go forward myself tomorrow.

The step envisaged in the last sentence of this telegram was duly taken. It did not receive that approval in London which might have been expected. Churchill wrote afterwards: 'He [Auchinleck] did not assume the command himself, but closely supervised his subordinate. This did not seem to me the best arrangement for either of them.'<sup>1</sup>

It is questionable whether this is entirely fair. The battle was in an intensely fluid condition, and crucial decisions had to be made from minute to minute. Auchinleck had just surmounted the difficult and painful crisis of Cunningham's supersession. Two natural and proper impulses were in conflict in him: the desire to sustain the impetus of attack which he himself had brought into the operations a week before, and the consciousness that he could not divest himself of his

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 511.



far-spread responsibilities and commitments as Commander-in-Chief. What he did was not a perfect solution to his problem; but it was adequate, and it worked for the time being very well. He had stemmed the tide of retreat, and in the week that had passed since he had done so, 'the enemy had had a severe hammering both on the ground and from the air and was much reduced in strength. It became therefore a question of maintaining the momentum of our attack, and I was determined that it should be maintained.'<sup>1</sup>

Too late to reach him before he went up to Maddalena—it was delivered to him and answered three days later—there came this final message from the departing C.I.G.S.:

*For General Sir C. Auchinleck personal from Field-Marshal Sir John Dill*

As from today Brooke will be acting as C.I.G.S. Will send you farewell message later but in meantime a thousand thanks for your loyal co-operation and good luck to you.

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 4.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Advance in the Desert

AUCHINLECK was at Eighth Army Headquarters from December 1 to December 10. In those days it became abundantly apparent that, as Churchill put it, 'the power of the Eighth Army was now predominant'.

While he was in the forward area Auchinleck wrote fully and frequently to his C.G.S., Arthur Smith; and Arthur Smith wrote in reply, giving him all the news about developments in Cairo.

These informative and very informal letters serve to give a detailed yet impressionistic picture of the swiftly running tide of events in this period.<sup>1</sup>

*General Smith to General Auchinleck*

2 December 1941

I am awfully glad you went up yesterday just at the right time. I have not the slightest doubt that you are a great help to Neil, and I hope it is not impertinent for me to say that I cannot think anybody would feel that your presence was interfering or unhelpful. . . .

John Shearer and I found today's communiqué extremely difficult to write. I enclose a copy and hope you approve.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

3 December 1941

Freyberg came in to lunch yesterday, looking exactly the same as ever. The N.Z. Div. (less 5th Bde) fought magnificently, but were overrun by the enemy tanks in spite of the fact that they had their own 'I' tanks. Truth is, I think, that they had become very weak in numbers after their own attacks on Sidi Rezegh, etc., which were all done at night with the bayonet. Freyberg estimates their losses at 4,000-5,000, but there are no means whatever at present of confirming this—nor did he know, I think, how many he actually brought out with him. Quite a number are in Tobruk,

<sup>1</sup> The first letter in this file of correspondence, from the C.G.S. to the C.-in-C., is marked at the top in Auchinleck's handwriting, 'BURN, C.J.A. 10/12'.

including most of the 2nd Line Transport. One battalion is still holding Belhamed and in touch with the Tobruk garrison, which is holding fast.

The N.Z.M.D.S. with all their wounded was overrun and I suppose all in it (a lot) captured. The div. has lost twenty-four guns, but we can replace these at once I imagine? If the 1st S.A. Bde could have got to the N.Z. a bit quicker they might very well be there now, but this is another story, not to be told now. Neil is sending Freyberg and his remnants back to Bagush to reform. . . . As you know, I hope eventually to send the div. to Syria, so it is not likely, I hope, to have to come back into the line here, but it may as well stay at Bagush for the time being until we can get the elements of it now in Tobruk out and back. It can help to look after the L. of C. . . . It is a pity, but it can't be helped—it's war.

They fought magnificently and inflicted very heavy casualties on Germans, who Freyberg thinks have had their belly-full. He says the carnage on Sidi Rezegh is worse than anything he has seen. The Germans turned their anti-tank guns on to our fellows and literally blew them to pieces, while the New Zealanders made a terrible mess of the Germans with the bayonet. Freyberg and the remnants of the div.—about 4,000—spent the night on the Wire some miles north of here—all in good heart I believe. They made a most orderly and masterly withdrawal from the battle.

Neil flew into Tobruk yesterday and cleared up future plans with Godwin very satisfactorily, I think; I do not want to discuss them, even with you, on paper. Godwin is quite confident he can hold the 'appendix' without undue risk of its being pinched out, which is good news. He says it is very strongly held, and they have wire and mines, besides quite a number of 'I' tanks. In fact, he is starting at once to work forward from its western face towards El Adem, which is *good*. He is relieving some of the more tired troops in the salient by the Poles. I hope he has sent back von Ravenstein to you by this time. Guard him well! I gather he told Godwin that they had not been up against fighting of this kind before. They haven't done with it yet!

Neil is handling the affair very well indeed, I think. He is completely confident and knows exactly what he wants. I feel myself that the whole picture is much more purposeful and much tidier than it has ever been before. We have learned a lot and we are going to profit by it. . . .

I saw in the paper that the march of the German prisoners had proved a 'flop'. Was this so, and, if so, who gets the sack? If it was so, please make them do it again at once. I look on this as

important as now the Egyptians will disbelieve that there ever were any prisoners!

I enclose a draft wire for the P.M., which you can edit or expand if you have later information. . . .

Everybody is in fine heart, no sign of any despondency. I hear nothing but praise for 4th Ind. Div., which is looked on as a really well trained and experienced div. The S. Africans are *not* trained and are much too unwieldy. Neil has ordered them to reduce their sections and cut down their transport. For the present, they are to be used for semi-static duties. There is nothing wrong with their fighting qualities—they are magnificent in battle—and their armoured cars are first-class—but they don't *know* yet. They are learning fast. . . .

The protracted nature of the fighting is a nuisance, of course, but I am quite happy and so is Neil. We will get this stinker down where he belongs before long I hope.

*General Smith to General Auchinleck*

*3 December 1941*

Delighted to hear that the New Zealanders fought so well and that their withdrawal was conducted in an orderly fashion. I am not surprised to hear this for they were indeed well trained.

Twenty-eight guns are already on their way up to the forward area, and Maxwell<sup>1</sup> is collecting all he can and is in close touch with Eighth Army regarding their reinforcements. I have impressed on the Staff here that we must try and anticipate demands for reinforcements and equipment and get them on the way up where possible before we get the official request. . . .

Von Ravenstein has not yet arrived from Tobruk. I was interested to hear that he stated that he had not been up against fighting of this kind before.

Delighted to hear you are so pleased with Neil. He is a grand fellow.

I am not surprised that the 1st South African Division proved to be untrained and inexperienced. I agree with you that they are learning fast, but it is rather an expensive lesson. I have had a feeling all along that the 1st South African Bde was a bit sticky in getting up to the support of the New Zealanders and I shall be interested to learn the reason why.

I am sorry there was a slip up about the German prisoners. Holmes laid it all on and then one of his staff officers rang up 'A' Branch here and was told that marching German prisoners through Cairo was not in accordance with your wishes. He did this

<sup>1</sup> Brig. A. H. Maxwell, at that time B.R.A. in G.H.Q.

on some previous ruling when the matter had been raised, and I am afraid 'A' Branch had not been told what your real views were. I have seen Holmes and the D.A.G. and arrangements are being made for the next batch of German prisoners to be marched through Cairo next Friday.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

*4 December 1941*

The 'I' tanks took part in all the Sidi Rezegh fighting, and suffered very heavily though they did their job, except perhaps in the final show, but why is not apparent. Probably there were too few of them by then. They also suffered heavily in the attacks on the Omars, being knocked out at close range by the German '88' guns. These are fine dual (A.A. and A/Tk) weapons. I saw four of them at Libyan Omar yesterday, captured by 4th Ind. Div. 4th Ind. Div. took fifty-nine guns of all calibres in the Omars. I think this should be made known. At the moment the 'I' tank position is said to be:

In Tobruk—Thirty odd.

In the Omars—Thirty odd with 2nd S.A. Div.

Also twenty-four Valentines with 30th Corps at Gabr Saleh.

I am most grateful for the wonderful way in which you are hastening the sending up of reinforcements. Please thank all concerned. It is very much appreciated here. . . .

I saw Freyberg again yesterday at Sidi Omar, where I went by car. He is all right and full of fight. I am hoping that his losses may prove less severe than first anticipated, but they *are* heavy I am afraid. Practically all the divisional medical equipment is lost, and will have to be replaced somehow. Maybe we will get some from the Boche before long. The 5th N.Z. Inf. Bde at Menastir is doing well and put it properly across a Boche column yesterday, I am delighted to hear. Forty more Boche dead! The N.Z. Div. is moving back to Bagush (less 5th Inf. Bde).

It is clear that Rommel is concentrating his forces between El Adem—Sidi Rezegh—Zaafran between the two escarpments, both of which are strongly held and form good positions against tank attack. He can move along this corridor and come out either east or west. At same time he seems to be reopening a repair and, possibly, a supply area north-west of Gambut. Yesterday he pushed mixed columns, including tanks, towards Sidi Azeiz and Menastir, but was roughly handled by our 'Jock' columns<sup>1</sup> and went back apparently.

<sup>1</sup> 'Jock' columns were small, improvised, highly mobile mixed groups of A.F.V.s, artillery and motorized infantry, formed for the specific purpose

My own opinion is that he *may* think we have shot our bolt. He has hammered the South Africans and hammered the New Zealanders, and cannot think we have much left. He may underestimate our tank strength (160 cruisers and M.3s this morning) as we have not done much for two days. If he does think this, I think he will go for Bardia-Capuzzo-Sidi Omar with a view to joining up with the Germans in Halfaya and establishing himself on the flank of the L. of C. of our main concentration at Gabr Saleh. He may think that by doing this he can cause us to withdraw hurriedly to Sidi Barrani-Railhead or administer the *coup de grâce*. He can then turn and finish Tobruk at his leisure. Against this is the fact that he must have suffered very heavily indeed—especially the German troops and Freyberg says they destroyed quantities of their equipment in the Sidi Rezegh battles. Also he cannot have a great number of running tanks.

The R.E. (Kisch<sup>1</sup>) have destroyed a total of sixty-four enemy tanks to date, and this excludes any round El Gubi or Sidi Rezegh, where we know he had casualties. However, I still think he may have a crack at it as it must look most tempting to him *if* he thinks we are down and out as he may well do. If he does this it should suit us very well, and I do not think he will get very far. At the moment, 2nd S.A. Div. is taking over from 4th Ind. Div. in the Sidi Omar-Capuzzo-Sollum area. Only one S.A. bde (less one bn) has got up so far and the delay in getting the second bde of this div. is causing Neil (and me) a little anxiety, as it is most important that 5th Ind. Bde should be released at once to join the remainder of the 4th Ind. Div. under 30th Corps at Gabr Saleh. 7th Ind. Bde was moving from Sidi Omar yesterday while I was there.

Neil is withdrawing 5th N.Z. Bde from Menastir-Bardia to Capuzzo-Sollum, partly because, though it was in strong positions, he felt it was rather exposed and might be a nuisance if it had to divert troops to its support, and also in order to release 5th Ind. Bde in view of late arrival of second bde of 2nd S.A. Div. in that area. . . .

*Tank futures!* Within next few days we should have:

Complete Armd Bde (4th) of Americans

Complete Armd Regt (22nd Bde) of A.13 and A.15

of dealing with Afrika Korps in this phase of the battle. Named after Brig. Jock Campbell, who formed the first such in the first Battle of Sidi Rezegh, they became a part of Western Desert folklore.

<sup>1</sup> Brig. F. Kisch, C.R.E. of Eighth Army, a brilliant and versatile officer, who was subsequently killed in action.

One and a half sqn of Valentines already in hand to be made up to complete regt.

One complete regt Matildas exclusive those in Tobruk. Not so dusty!?

Tobruk is in great form and worrying the enemy's rear.

I feel we are a little short perhaps of good infantry on the ground to confirm and exploit success, but I think we can make do.

Last night the Air Force fairly got into the enemy vehicle concentrations round Sidi Rezegh. The Abbacors came along, dropped flares, found such wonderful targets that they went back on their own and got more bombs! Great stuff! This morning they are at it again, bombing and low flying attacks at Sidi Rezegh and along the coastal area north of the road Bardia-Tobruk. They have just intercepted an enemy bomber attack on 1st S.A. Bde and destroyed six Stukas and damaged six more. They really are magnificent.

I am staying on here for a bit. It's d—d cold but most refreshing after Cairo. . . .

Give my love (or my respectful greetings) to the Minister.

Telegram for P.M. enclosed.

It's a great life if you don't weaken!

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

*5 December 1941*

I do not like to look too hopefully into the future, as you know, but there are signs that he is at last feeling the effect of our continual hammering, and as if our sudden and vigorous renewal of the offensive on the whole front from Bardia to El Adem and beyond to Acroma may have come as a bit of a shock to him. Anyway, his thrusts towards Capuzzo seem to have been half-hearted and to have petered out under the attacks of our 'Jock' columns. Of course they may never have been meant for anything more than feints. In any event, they represented energy and oil expended and he can't afford to waste these.

The fact that our columns were yesterday within a few miles of El Adem and Sidi Rezegh and shelling enemy on the roads to the north is first-class news and must have made him think a lot. The 4th Ind. Div. (11th Ind. Inf. Bde) and the 4th Armd Bde seem to have done a first-class job with the remains of Ariete at Bir el Gubi—a good bag. Tobruk's repulse of the attack on the salient is great news too, particularly as they claim heavy enemy casualties—which are I hope mainly German. (Don't be too optimistic!) It looks as if Rommel *may* after all have thought we were down and out and incapable of further offensive action.

These 'Jock' columns of which more and more are being organized are just what we want. They picket his movements and give him no rest, and are, I hope, giving us command of that enormous no-man's-land in the quadrilateral Gambut-Bardia-Omar-Rezegh. They seem to suit our peculiar genius for fighting, and are certainly going at the enemy with the greatest relish and vigour. I can quite understand why they suit our chaps. No red tabs! No written orders!! No ruddy principles of war!!! (Except hit and have after him.) No generals!!!! (Except pretty far back.) Of course they need close and careful co-ordination if the best is to be got out of them, and this means very good W/T communication. This is all being organized and is, I hope, going well. If and when we really get the enemy on the run (don't be too optimistic!) they will be invaluable biting him on his flanks and rear and cutting in in front of him. Some armoured cars, a few guns (field and A/Tk) and some lorried infantry. I think the Hun finds them somewhat unorthodox. . . .

I felt yesterday, for the first time since the end of the first abortive armoured battle, that the situation was really in hand. We know now more or less where we are, and have a very definite offensive plan. Moreover, our reconnaissance and protective arrangements are, I feel, on a sound basis and should enable us to keep a proper ban on enemy movement.

As I said in my telegram to the Prime Minister, I am pretty sure Rommel will use the last of his armour in an attempt to throw us off our balance. He tried before, you remember, and very nearly succeeded. If he tries again he will find us very much on our toes I think, and not up against the ropes. Neil is very wisely keeping the bulk of our armour centrally placed ready to counter-attack north, north-west or north-east. It is *not* being tied to the infantry.

I am very glad that the 4th Indian Div. is now leading the offensive. Everyone seems to think that they are a most competent crowd, and yesterday's show seems to go to prove this.

P.S. You may expect me when you see me! Meanwhile, I am sure you are coping with the various Committees!

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

*6 December 1941*

We diagnosed Rommel's state of mind correctly I think. I believe he did think we had shot our bolt and that he had won the battle. Our renewed activity and our threat to El Adem has, I feel, caused him to change his mind and take thought for his own future. Neil is very quick to diagnose the changing situations and he and I are very much in step. Having John [Shearer] here as an



independent interpreter of Rommel's mind helps a lot. I feel very confident that we have the situation very much in hand though he will do all he can to throw us out of step. In fact he is at it now with his armour. If by good luck Gathouse can give him a real smashing blow today and do in his remaining tanks we should have a clear run through. It is all teed up. But I am not hoping for too much and it may take a little time yet. However, the P.M. seems happy. Isn't he grand? A wonderful chap. All well here and everyone fighting like hell. The Air Force is magnificent and our 'Jock' columns have been doing awfully well.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

6 December 1941

Many thanks for the war communiqués which are, I think, very good. Please do not let them talk about mobile 'patrols'. Our 'Jock' columns are balanced forces of all arms, as we used to say, and are most offensive and distinctive. They work with definite objects and are co-ordinated by higher commanders. They are the answer in this kind of fighting to the control of no-man's-land, besides being most valuable gainers of information. Your communiqués rather give the impression of isolated patrols roaming in the battlefield, whereas the 'Jock' columns have been in close and continuous touch with the enemy on a wide front, and shell his troops and transport continually, besides taking prisoners. . . .

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

7 December 1941

As I have so often said, I am very much afraid of being too optimistic, but I do feel this morning as if the turning point may be near. I say 'may', as the enemy has shown his wonderful powers of recovery more than once, and he may well do so again before we finish him off.

As you will see, the news is encouraging. He has apparently withdrawn from the east of Tobruk, except the pockets in the Bardia-Halfaya area, and the 2nd S.A. Div. with the 5th New Zealand Brigade and, I am told, patrols from Tobruk, are combing the whole area Gambut-Sidi Azeiz-Sidi Rezegh, and may, I think, pick up quite a lot one way and another. Once this area is clear, the Air Force will take the landing grounds in it into use, and the South Africans and New Zealanders will turn their attention to Bardia, 'Covo' and Halfaya—at least, that is Neil Ritchie's present intention.

As for the southern flank, it remains to be seen what degree of resistance he will put up on the El Adem-El Gubi line, or whether he will attempt a desperate counter-stroke against our left or

centre. It would be like him to stage a sudden transfer of what tanks he has left from south to north and erupt once more towards Sidi Omar or Gabr Saleh. If he does he will find these excellent 'Jock' columns hanging on to his flanks and rear, giving him no rest. He isn't getting any rest and he must be damned tired. The Air Force are giving him a terrible pasting and our artillery is doing grand work.

I am not announcing the relief of Tobruk yet, though it is possible that the P.M. may use the news. I do not mind if he does. When El Adem is securely in our hands then I will admit that Tobruk is relieved—not before. Anyway, until we do get El Adem we cannot really make full use of Tobruk as an advanced base of supply, which it is most urgent that we should be able to do.

The Air Force last night had a most wonderful target and took full advantage of it. It is grand to see Neil and 'Mary'<sup>1</sup> working in the fullest possible accord, thinking out where the targets will be, and what is more wonderful—finding them!

It is great news about the New Zealand wounded having been recovered at Sidi Rezegh. I have no details yet, but we hope there are a lot of them. Neil has all his plans ready for immediate pursuit. In fact, pursuit has already started, not only in the air but on the ground, as our 'Jock' columns and armoured cars are working well round behind him to the south. We must expect some setbacks yet, and may strike a major snag, but we are looking well ahead and I know very well that there will be no relaxation of the pressure while Neil-Coningham are running this show. Everyone is in grand form—I have never met so few people with livers! . . .

I can't come back yet, but I will as soon as I can. . . .

Stop Press: Enemy forty tanks and quantity M.T. on defensive west of El Gubi being shelled by our artillery, on which M.T. or some of it went north. Our Armd Bde standing off ready to go in if opportunity offers. 'Jock' columns working round south flank.

*General Smith to General Auchinleck*

*7 December 1941*

I must say that the general situation is most promising, and it looks to me as if the Hun was going to get back at least as far as the Tobruk-El Adem line. Personally until we have secured this line I shall not feel 100 per cent safe in announcing the relief of Tobruk. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham was a New Zealander and had been nicknamed, in his early days in the R.A.F., 'Maori'. This, by corruption, had become 'Mary'.

I note you write, 'I can't come back yet'—I can't help wondering if the word 'can't' should not have read 'won't'. . . .

A worrying factor with which we are now confronted is a potential threat on our shipping. Enemy air is likely to be reinforced for this purpose, and I fully expect that we shall get more losses in shipping to Tobruk. A.A. defence on merchant ships is inadequate. I have therefore ordered that first priority for allotment of captured Bredas shall be to the Navy for this purpose. . . .

I have just seen Lumsden who tells me that not a single tank arrived from England complete with equipment, and one was quite empty except for a tow rope. The 12th Lancers did magnificent work in getting away, and if you or Neil see the C.O. I think a pat on the back is well deserved.

I understand that von Ravenstein was salvaged, and if this information is correct he should be arriving in Cairo tomorrow.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

*8 December 1941*

I quite agree with you as to the danger to our shipping in and out of Tobruk. We discussed it this morning and A.O.C.-in-C. will, I am sure, tell you the decisions arrived at. It was a great pity the Admiral was not there.

It is a disgrace the way those tanks have been shipped from England. Please have a documented statement prepared for me to send home. I will remember about the 12th Lancers. . . .

Things moved a good deal quicker yesterday and will, I hope, go even quicker today. We know from 'I' that his armour moved last night, but we have had no news of it today as yet. Neil Ritchie is satisfied that the necessary ginger is being applied to keep things moving, and I think it is.

The Tobruk garrison have done well and have taken some prisoners north-east of El Adem.

The 5th N.Z. Bde Gp is to be used by Godwin-Austen either to strengthen the push towards El Adem along the escarpment from the east or to break out to the west from Tobruk towards Acroma.

Neil's plans for the future are sound and vigorous.

\* \* \*

On Sunday, December 7, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour. The United States was thus brought fully into the war. The effects on policy and strategy were immediate and far-reaching. So far as Auchinleck's Command was concerned, the Middle East, which

<sup>1</sup> Maj.-Gen. (later Lieut.-Gen.) Herbert Lumsden, commander of the 1st Armoured Division.

hitherto had been the only operational theatre in which British and Commonwealth troops were fully committed, became one of many.

Alan Brooke, who had taken up his duties as C.I.G.S. on the day that Auchinleck flew up to Eighth Army, decided on December 3 the pattern which the country's future strategy should assume; this was 'to direct both military and political efforts towards the early conquest of North Africa. From there we shall be able to reopen the Mediterranean and to stage offensive operations against Italy.'<sup>1</sup> A swift prosecution of Auchinleck's offensive in the Desert, and a strong defence of Malta, in order to interrupt Rommel's supply lines and strengthen Auchinleck's, were the two cardinal factors in this policy. Four days later, however, this sound, neat and workmanlike appreciation was blown to bits by the Japanese assault not only on Pearl Harbour, but on the British and Dutch dependencies in the Far East, and the immediate threat to Burma.

The next few weeks, said Arthur Bryant, were a 'strategist's nightmare'. For Auchinleck in the Middle East they meant an immediate enlargement of his difficulties and a narrowing of his opportunities.

The first effect can be seen in the last letter which the C.G.S. wrote before the Commander-in-Chief returned from the Desert.

*General Smith to General Auchinleck*

*8 December 1941*

The Singapore cable has been cut from this morning—presumably as a result of the Japanese war—and that means that practically all our telegrams to the War Office will now have to go by wireless. This will throw a terrific strain on our wireless, but I think we can cope with it. It does mean, however, that we must make a further effort to reduce the number of cables and their length. There is one cable route via South Africa but it is in rather wonky condition and not to be relied on. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Other consequences, far more serious and far more sustained, were to follow very soon. In the meantime, Rommel's situation in the Western Desert had steadily worsened, Ritchie's had steadily improved. It was a stern day-by-day slogging match, the course of which on the British side has been traced in Auchinleck's letters to his C.I.G.S. From General Bayerlein's essay in *The Rommel Papers*<sup>3</sup> a clear conception can be reached of how it looked on the Axis side.

The Italians had had enough. Afrika Korps were very tired, but

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> A marginal note adds, '20.00 hours: now mended!'

<sup>3</sup> Pp. 171-2.

were able again and again throughout the first week in December to summon up the energy to renew the assault. On December 5 Mussolini sent a staff officer to the Italo-German Army H.Q. to say that no reinforcements for the Panzer Group could be expected to arrive before the beginning of January. Until then nothing could be done except to cover the bare essentials of rations and ammunition. 'This information,' said Bayerlein, 'did not make us any more cheerful.'

In two attempts to reach his frontier garrisons, now cut off in the Bardia-Sollum area, Rommel had sent two armoured columns eastward, one along the coast road, the other along the Trigh Capuzzo. Both, as has been seen, were defeated, the first by the 5th New Zealand Brigade and the second by the 5th Indian Brigade. His heavy attack on the Tobruk salient on December 4 was very nearly successful. Desmond Young said that had it been resumed on the following day, it might have been completely so, for deep penetrations had been made into the British positions.

But it was at Bir el Gubi, six miles south of El Adem, the position which the Ariete Division had held a fortnight earlier when 'Crusader' was launched, that the decisive battle was fought. On the night of December 5 Rommel considered a staff appreciation which ended with these words: 'There still appears to be a chance of gaining a decision, by launching all the remaining German and Italian panzer and motorized divisions in a concerted attack against the British at Gubi. If this fails to destroy a substantial part of the enemy's force, then, in view of our own heavy losses in men and material, we shall have to consider breaking off the battle and withdrawing to the Gazala position, and later evacuating Cyrenaica altogether.'

The Italians were out of action. The Afrika Korps went into battle alone. The British, said Bayerlein, 'fell back slowly on Bir el Gubi, but it was no longer possible to destroy, or even outflank and envelop any material part of their force. There was in fact a serious danger of our own force being outflanked round both sides by the superior enemy. In spite of this, the attack was resumed on December 7, again without success.'

German casualties were heavy. Rommel now decided to give up Tobruk completely and beat a fighting retreat to Gazala.

On December 4 Churchill had signalled Auchinleck: 'The only thing that matters is to beat the life out of Rommel and company.' Complete fulfilment of this very proper aim was to be denied Auchinleck; but Rommel by the night of December 7-8 was prepared to admit defeat and disengage. On December 9 he wrote to his wife:

I've had to break off the action outside Tobruk on account of the Italian formations and also the badly exhausted German troops. I'm hoping we'll succeed in escaping enemy encirclement and holding on to Cyrenaica. . . . You can imagine what I'm going through and what anxieties I have. . . .

On December 10 Auchinleck telegraphed to Churchill:

Enemy is apparently in full retreat towards the west. El Adem is taken. South African and Indian troops joined hands there with British from Tobruk, and I think it now permissible to claim that the siege of Tobruk has been raised. We are pursuing vigorously in fullest co-operation with the Royal Air Force.

On December 11 Auchinleck returned, with undisguised reluctance, to Cairo. 'Crusader' was, to all intents and purposes, at an end—or, at any rate, the Commander-in-Chief's direct concern with and interest in it. Henceforth, during many months, Auchinleck was to be immersed in the heavy responsibilities of his huge Command as a whole. But the 'Crusader' battle had been of the greatest importance in the general course of the war, and in Auchinleck's own life. His moral and spiritual stamina, at the crisis of November 23–25 and during the tense fortnight of swiftly varying fortunes which followed, has been justly praised.

There can be no doubt that his personal presence was a tonic and an inspiration in the field. Two short extracts—both undated but clearly traceable to this period—from letters seen in censorship were quoted in an Intelligence summary.

*A senior officer:*

Things have been fairly unsettled here but I hope the worst is now over and that the 'Auk' will be able to hit the Hun hard after all. He is such a grand man—I wish you could meet him some time.

*A warrant-officer:*

General Auchinleck is now in charge of Eighth Army. He will be capable of dealing with the threat better than anyone else out here. He is a fine chap and seems well respected by the troops. He is showing a good example by roughing it too in the desert; he sleeps at night in the open without a camp bed.

The South African Official History has stressed Auchinleck's

determination to achieve victory, and the whole-hearted support which he received from his corps commanders. Its authors regard 'Crusader' as one more confirmation of Foch's dictum that 'a battle lost is a battle which one thinks one has lost'. This is quite true on the moral side; but it is not a full explanation of Auchinleck's defeat of Rommel in these three weeks. There was never any lack of resolution, courage or will to victory when 'Crusader' was at its worst; there was, however, a great dearth of intelligence in every sense of that word.

The brain which Auchinleck brought to the conduct of the battle after November 23 was even more important than the guts. Generalship is not a suitable profession for amateurs and brave boobies. Rommel was a professional; he was by no means a booby, though he could be very foolish and headstrong at times; but he was nowhere near Auchinleck's equal in sheer intelligence.<sup>1</sup> Rommel fought the critical phases of 'Crusader' in a red haze of pugnacity. Auchinleck was clear-headed and calm. His brain would have been useless without his guts (if he had been solely an intellectual, he would not have been Commander-in-Chief); but his guts without his trained and educated brain, allied to his flair, his intuition, would have been disastrous.

One further major factor in the conduct of 'Crusader' has to be considered—the attitude of the Prime Minister. If, while the offensive was being prepared, his impatience, his 'prodding', his interference and his supervision were hard to bear, once battle was joined his support, his encouragement and his calmness in the face of apparently imminent disaster, were of immeasurable importance to the Commander-in-Chief—particularly since, during this period, Dill went and Brooke was not yet firmly in the saddle. Churchill could make many wrong judgments; he could goad good and brave men almost beyond endurance; but he never flapped in a crisis. He was a rock in a time of trouble.

The clouds of suspicion, misunderstanding and lack of confidence were to return; but the events of these weeks were irradiated by the light of a strong, sure sense of comradeship.

<sup>1</sup> Cruewell lacked Rommel's dash and fire; but he was a better educated, more intelligent and more thoughtful soldier.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### Benghazi for Christmas

BACK in Cairo there was no release from pressing responsibilities and arduous and difficult situations. Major-General (later General Sir Daril) Watson, then Director of Staff Duties at the War Office, was due to return to London on the evening of December 11 after a liaison visit. He took with him a brief note from Auchinleck to the new C.I.G.S.:

I apologize for not having written you a proper letter, but I am pretty busy. I hope to be able to do so soon.

Information from the Front is hard to come by, as Neil has moved his advanced headquarters some ninety miles forward, and it's a longish fly from Cairo for liaison officers. However, all seems to be going well at the moment and we are getting along. Everyone at the Front is flat out.

I flew back myself yesterday but hope to go back again shortly. It is grand up there. This place is awful. . . .

P.S. The latest news from Neil is good and the pursuit seems to be going on very vigorously, though it is impossible to say what we may have picked up in the way of prisoners and material.

One urgent matter had to be dealt with at once. As has been seen, the Prime Minister (and the Chief of the Air Staff) had taken exception to Air Marshal Tedder's pre-'Crusader' calculations as to relative air strengths in the Middle East. The immediate crisis which these calculations<sup>1</sup> had provoked had been surmounted; but Auchinleck returned from the Desert to find waiting for him a letter from the Chief of the Air Staff, asking his opinion on whether—after the battle—Tedder should not be replaced, with honour, and a new, responsible posting in the United Kingdom.

*General Auchinleck to Air Chief Marshal Portal 11 December 1941*

Your letter of November 25 reached me yesterday. I am sorry

<sup>1</sup> In view of the almost catastrophic effects of optimism on the opening phase of 'Crusader' on the ground, it is possible to wonder whether Tedder's 'pessimism' was not the wiser attitude.



we have not yet put paid to Rommel's account, but we are getting on with it and I think that at last we have him rattled. But he is a tough customer and full of resource. I feel we are tougher and can beat him at his own game.

I am glad to think that I was of some help to you last month when Tedder's fate was in the balance. As you say, it would have been a dreadful mistake. I am quite sure about that.

You ask me for my advice as to whether a change should be made after the battle. From my own point of view I can tell you at once that I should be very sorry indeed to see Tedder go. He has been absolutely splendid in this show, full of resolution and courage, and most helpful with suggestions. The co-operation has, I think, been almost perfect. Anyway, the Army thinks it has been wonderful and so do I.

In a very difficult moment when we had our first setback and I had to make a change in the Army Command, he was a real help in time of trouble, and it was largely due to his courageous outlook and complete straightforwardness that I was able to make the decision I did, which I am absolutely certain was the right one. I owe him a deep debt of gratitude for that.

As I say, I shall be most distressed if he does go, and I am left, and for my own selfish reasons I hope he will not. Also for the good of the Army I hope he will be left here. He knows the whole immense problem backwards, and that is saying a lot.

If it is necessary to change him for the reasons you mention, which are really beyond my ken, then it can't be helped I suppose. . . .

I feel that with the prospect of the war spreading to Anatolia and Syria and Iraq in the New Year, it would be a mistake to move a commander who has such a unique knowledge of the factors involved.

Having thus firmly scotched the idea that Tedder should be superseded, and having put on record his belief in the value of close co-operation and understanding between the commanders on land and in the air, Auchinleck had to turn his attention to the larger strategic scene. Sacrifices in manpower and equipment were being urgently demanded of him—at the very moment in which he needed every man, every tank and every gun that he had been promised, in order to complete and consolidate his victory.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*12 December 1941*

The great change in world situation during last four days requires a review of our affairs. I must ask you to spare 18th

Division now rounding the Cape for diversion to Bombay. This seems justified by improved prospects of your battle and even more by the very decided Russian successes which relieve our immediate anxieties in Caucasus and south of Caspian. It is essential that we fulfil grievous needs strengthening long-starved India and enabling a stronger resistance to be made to Japanese advance against Burma and down Malay Peninsula. The easement in Persia and Iraq makes you freer to use remainder 50th Division from Baghdad or 5th Indian Division in Cyprus if you need them. Nothing must of course prejudice 'Crusader' and I hope even with this diversion you will be able to pursue 'Acrobat' and keep 'Gymnast'<sup>1</sup> in mind dependent on Vichy French North African reaction to a Libyan victory.

It is proposed that your Command should be extended eastwards to cover Iraq and Persia thus giving local unity command in the event of Turkish and Caucasus danger reviving. The change will only be effected as convenient between you and Wavell.

Wavell must now look east. He will be given command of Burma front. He will be reinforced by 18th Division which he can work eastwards to best advantage as he chooses and will keep 17th Indian Division. Four aircraft squadrons now rounding Cape for Caucasus will go to India. We are also sending Wavell special hamper anti-aircraft and A/Tk guns, some motor lorries thirty cwt. which are already *en route*.

Japanese war having broken out and American and British battleship strength being so gravely reduced, Hong Kong is isolated and must fight to the end. We cannot tell how America will fare at Manila observing Japanese have battle fleet command these waters. Brooke-Popham's Command is therefore reduced to Malay Peninsula-Singapore-Borneo.

This telegram and a similar one to Wavell<sup>2</sup> were despatched a few hours before the Prime Minister set off in H.M.S. *Duke of York* on his momentous wintry journey to Washington to confer with Roosevelt. Eden, the Foreign Secretary, was also at sea *en route* to Russia to see Stalin. Two days earlier, almost simultaneously with Auchinleck's report that the siege of Tobruk had now been raised and Rommel was in retreat, there had come the calamitous news of the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*. In the rapid series of defeats which the Allies now had to bear, comparable only to the disasters of May

<sup>1</sup> Code-name for British military aid to Weygand in French North Africa, if he would accept it.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. III, p. 564.

and June 1940, the only light upon the darkening scene was provided by Eighth Army, which, after the grim vicissitudes of the previous month, was now experiencing the joys of victory and swift pursuit. Even these joys, however, were tinged with anxiety about difficulties in administration, a lengthening supply line and a diminishing flow of reinforcements. It was one of the many ironies of desert warfare that the greater your apparent victory, and the farther your enemy retreated, the farther you yourself were from your base, and the lighter, the less easily equipped and the more physically exhausted were the forces that you could keep in the field. This was Rommel's perpetual difficulty, in spite of a skill and a flexibility in administration to which Auchinleck paid tribute. It beset O'Connor in 1940 and Ritchie in 1941.

For a brief interval, however, the sun shone. Eighth Army drove forward, though Rommel's retreat was anything but a disorganized rout. When the Axis forces left the Tobruk-El Adem area they took up a new defence line running southwards from Gazala. Here on December 12 British forward troops began to press them hard. These were the spearhead of 13th Corps. 30th Corps in the meantime turned eastwards to reduce the enemy's garrisons cut off in the Bardia-Sollum area on and near the Egyptian frontier.

Auchinleck said in his despatch:

I had at first thought that the enemy's stand at Gazala was only another delaying action to cover further withdrawal. But the resistance offered to our pressure, his heavy counter-attacks, of which the 4th Indian Division bore the brunt, and numerous air attacks showed that he hoped to check our advance on this line and was using all his available forces to this end, probably in a last effort to keep his hold on the valuable base and port of Benghazi. General Ritchie placed more troops at General Godwin-Austen's disposal to enable him to increase the frontal pressure and instructed him to send the Armoured Division to turn the enemy's southern flank. The 4th Armoured Brigade moved wide over difficult country and gained a position to the south of Tmimi well in rear of the enemy's positions, but its subsequent movements were much impeded by bad going. On the night of December 16 the enemy began to withdraw from his Gazala positions and the remnants of his armoured forces managed to slip away in the darkness.

Rommel on December 15 had reported to O.K.W.:

After four weeks of uninterrupted and costly fighting, the fighting power of the troops—despite superb individual achievements—is showing signs of flagging, all the more so as the supply of arms and ammunition has completely dried up. While the Army intends to maintain its hold on the Gazala area during 16th, retreat through Mechili-Derna will be unavoidable, at the latest during the night of the 16th, if it is to escape being outflanked and destroyed by a superior enemy.

This decision, which cannot have been an easy one for a man of Rommel's temperament, gravely disturbed his Italian allies. There was a conference at Rommel's Headquarters just before midnight on December 15-16 between Rommel, Bastico (the Governor of Italian North Africa), Cavallero and Gambarra (the Italian commanders in the field); there was also present Field-Marshal Kesselring, who had at the end of November arrived in the Mediterranean theatre to take up the newly created post of Commander-in-Chief South. Cavallero, supported by Kesselring (who made no reference to this incident in his memoirs), demanded that the order for the retreat should be withdrawn. Rommel stood firmly by his decision, though he realized that it would mean the eventual loss of Cyrenaica, and that Mussolini might be put into serious political trouble thereby. The choice, as he saw it, was between staying where he was—dooming Panzergruppe to destruction, and losing Tripolitania as well as Cyrenaica—and beginning the retreat immediately and fighting his way back to Agadabia, there to stand and defend Tripolitania.

This was a war of swiftly and dramatically changing fortunes. Three weeks and one day earlier, in Brigadier Galloway's caravan at Maddalena, Auchinleck had faced an equally grim choice. He had refused to retreat and had ordered 'Crusader' to go on, and Rommel was in this plight now because of Auchinleck's decision.

On the evening of December 16 the Afrika Korps and the Italian Motorized Corps, all under Cruewell's command, began their withdrawal across the southern edge of the Cyrenaica mountains to El Abiar, while the Italian non-motorized infantry marched back along the coastal strip.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck 17 December 1941. 08.40 hrs.*

... At some period during the night the detachment in the Tmimi neighbourhood was apparently attacked and forced to withdraw from the road, and it appears that at any rate a portion of the German armour and some of the Italian mobile corps

succeeded in escaping by that route last night. I need hardly say that this is quite infuriating. . . .

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

17-18 December 1941<sup>1</sup>

*General.* My fears expressed in my letter to you this morning have been fully confirmed and it seems to me that the enemy got clean away during last night. Nothing could be more maddening than this. However, if it is indeed any consolation to know it, just the same occurred to Dick O'Connor last year at Mechili.

*Today 13th Corps Front.* The advance has continued rapidly I am glad to say. 4th Ind. Div. have moved fifty miles, or nearly that distance, but we have met little or no opposition and not collected in a great number of prisoners. A good deal of enemy material has, I hear, fallen into our hands.

As I see it, the enemy has divided his forces; part going via the coast route, the rest by Mechili. Lack of contacts today make it hard to place the composition of the component parts, but there is, or was this afternoon, a mass of stuff moving in a somewhat disorganized stream towards Benghazi from Mechili and there are indications that the enemy's situation is pretty bad. His movements are being well attended to by 'Mary' Coningham whose bombers and ground strafing fighters have had good targets on both the Mechili-Benghazi and Derna roads today. . . .

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

18 December 1941. 23.50 hrs.

*General.* The enemy appears tonight to be cracking properly. We are into the outskirts of Derna, where the aerodrome is in our hands and the Armoured Div. is, as far as I know, well stuck in to a large amount of enemy transport in the Mechili neighbourhood, and to the west of that place. Much enemy M.T. movement, which appears to be considerably disorganized, is reported on the move westwards on the roads from Derna to Barce and also on the roads leading west from Mechili towards Benghazi. There is also some indication of movement south-westwards from Mechili, though the information I have now leads me to the conclusion that most of the movement from that place is towards Benghazi. The Air Force have had first-rate targets and from all accounts have indeed inflicted a great deal of damage to the enemy's thin-skinned units. It is sad that the Navy were unable to sink the four convoy

<sup>1</sup> This letter was begun late at night on December 17, but was finished and signed early on the morning of December 18. It is dated 17th at the top, but at the end, in Ritchie's handwriting, near his signature, is written: '06.30 G.M.T., 18.12.41.'

ships. Anyhow, they have had to turn away from Benghazi and are now making course for Tripoli. This will certainly greatly ease the immediate situation for us in Cyrenaica. . . .

Rommel's gravest danger during this retreat was that his supply lines from Sicily would be cut; the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force were doing their utmost to bring this about. But the Navy's effort had been considerably diminished by the loss of the *Ark Royal* and the *Barham*—the latter sunk by a daring torpedo attack while the battle of Sidi Rezegh was at its height. On the night of December 17 an Axis transport got into Benghazi harbour and brought the strength of the 15th Panzer Division—by now desperately low—up to forty tanks.

Eighth Army Intelligence was aware of the arrival of this ship, but thought, as General Ritchie's next letter showed, that its cargo was petrol.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck 20 December 1941. 12.00 hrs.*

It is a pity that this supply ship of the enemy's has succeeded in getting to Benghazi and its arrival there has entailed a slight modification in my plan. This is on account of the fact that the capture of Benghazi and the prevention of the distribution of fuel from this ship is more than ever urgent. This has meant pushing everything that can be made mobile of the 7th Div. as hard as possible west of Mechili directed straight on to Benghazi. . . .

*General Situation.* This, I think, continues to be excellent, and my chief trouble, of course, is being unable to follow up quick enough to keep the enemy continuously on the move and allow him no respite whatsoever. Towards this end everything possible is being put on the ground, vehicles of all kinds pooled to get a hard-hitting portion of the 7th Armoured Div. straight to Benghazi. And on this policy I propose to continue for as long as ever I can. In view of his present state we are, in my opinion, quite justified in taking the gravest risks, both tactically and administratively, to keep him on the move right into Tripolitania; and this is going to happen. I still believe that we will prevent very largely the distribution of the petrol which I understand is in the supply ship now in Benghazi, for I cannot imagine a more difficult task than getting this distributed in the circumstances in which the enemy is at present. With air action by us, with panic amongst the Italians and disorganization amongst the Germans, and being hard-pressed by our ground troops of the 7th Div., I cannot see how he can achieve this. The Air are doing splendidly but

unfortunately were not able to get fighters operating from landing grounds near Mechili yesterday. A great misfortune this. We had hoped that there would be excellent facilities for landing in the salt pans near Baltet el Ramla . . . but our hopes have been shattered as they are waterlogged. Nevertheless, the main thing has been done in getting the aviation supplies well forward, and at least four squadrons of fighters will be operating from the Mechili landing ground today. This means that we will be able to put fighter cover over the Gebel area, over Benghazi and well to the south of it too. This will be a tremendous asset. . . .

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck 20 December 1941. 23.20 hrs.*  
For yourself and Minister of State alone.

I rejoice in your continued victorious exchanges and pursuit. I am on way to the U.S. to confer with President Roosevelt about the future conduct of the war. Please continue to send me your admirable accounts, which will help me in convincing American doubters of the wisdom of our Middle East campaign.

When will 2nd Armoured Brigade strike and where?

Every good wish.

This was a most cheering telegram to receive; but its heartening effect had to be set against sombre news from the Royal Navy. On the night of December 18 Admiral Cunningham's two remaining battleships, the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Valiant* (both of World War I vintage, but until now a formidable final reserve) had their bottoms blown out by time-bombs affixed to them by Italian 'frogmen' as they lay in Alexandria harbour. And on December 19 Force K, which at Churchill's insistence had been based on Malta, in an attempt to intercept a convoy of Axis supplies bound for Tripoli, ran into a minefield, and three cruisers and four destroyers were sunk. Later in this same week another cruiser was sunk by U-boats. 'Nothing remained in the two thousand miles between Gibraltar and Alexandria of Britain's mastery of the Mediterranean but three cruisers and a handful of destroyers and submarines.'<sup>1</sup>

In the air there was a sudden revival of Axis strength. Since flying was impossible on the Russian front at this time of the year, the 1st German Air Corps was transferred to the Mediterranean theatre. By the middle of December German air strength had risen to 637 aircraft (339 of which were serviceable) from 400 (206 serviceable) a month earlier. These were used to launch a fierce attack on Malta,

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 286.

to guard the supply lines to Rommel, and to protect Panzergruppe in its retreat westward. Stuka dive-bombers and Me 109s made an unwelcome re-appearance over the desert battlefields.

*General Rommel to Frau Rommel*

20 December 1941

We're pulling out. There was nothing else for it. I hope we manage to get back to the line we've chosen. . . . Some supplies have arrived—the first since October. My commanding officers are ill—all those who aren't dead or wounded.<sup>1</sup>

The true consequences of what had happened on the sea and in the air were fully apparent to neither of the opposing Commanders at this time, but Auchinleck was beginning to have some awareness.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

21 December 1941

Very many thanks indeed for your most excellent letters which have been invaluable to me. I do not know how you find time to write them, but that does not make me any less grateful for them!

I am just as annoyed about this supply ship getting into Benghazi as you are. In fact we don't seem to have had much luck in our efforts to stop the last convoy getting over. I fancy the enemy got the better of that round, which is most annoying, when one thinks of how well we have been doing up to date in the way of interrupting his supplies. It is bad luck our having a failure at this critical time, but it can't be helped. Maybe the R.A.F. will put her down while she is in harbour. I sincerely hope so!

I am so glad you are pleased with the general situation, and so am I—very. You have done splendidly, and so have all your chaps. It has been a magnificent effort up to date, and you all deserve every bit of credit that you get.

Sitting back here (much against my will!) it looks to me today, from the information we have, as if the Hun had already succeeded in getting a good part of his remaining German troops back to Agedabia, or at any rate south of Benghazi, and this was only to be expected once he had decided not to make a major attempt to cover Benghazi. How much he may have got back is probably better known to you than to us. . . . He is, I think, certain to fight a delaying action east of Benghazi to allow as much stuff as possible to be got away from there.

I entirely agree with you as to the great importance of Benghazi at this moment to him. This importance will, I imagine, diminish

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 175.



as our threat to the road between Benghazi and Agedabia becomes more imminent.

If he succeeds in concentrating the bulk of his forces at Agedabia, they will then become your main objective, I presume. I think it is possible he may try and make a stand at Agedabia, possibly in the hope of retaining a foothold in Cyrenaica, but, almost certainly, to delay our pursuit and allow him to get his stuff back to Sirte or wherever he may decide eventually to reorganize. If he decides to try and hold us up at Agedabia, he may deliver himself into our hands *if* (and I know how big an *if* it is!) we can maintain thus far forward a force adequate in size to deal with him. However, I know you realize all this better than I do. . . .

I am so glad you are thinking so far ahead. . . . I realize what it means administratively, and that it looks impossible. There are a lot of long faces here, but we'll manage it somehow!! . . .

If you see a chance of giving my old battalion, 1/1 Punjab, a show, I'm sure they'd be most grateful. So would I! But I realize it is most unlikely that they will be wanted. . .

Hope to get up to pay you a visit on Wednesday. Shall probably bring John Shearer with me and hope to stay five or six days. I'd like to have a look at Tobruk.

Good luck. You're doing fine!

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*21 December 1941*

Most grateful for your telegram of December 20 and good wishes. Have communicated your message to the Minister of State.

2nd Armoured Brigade is destined for 'Acrobat' but is at hand in Eighth Army Reserve if needed earlier. 22nd Armoured Brigade of 1st Armoured Division has now taken over pursuit from 4th Armoured Brigade of 7th Armoured Division and is at Mechili with mixed mobile columns forward directed on Benghazi and Antelat, its tanks being temporarily immobilized at Mechili owing to supply difficulties which are being overcome. It is not possible to maintain any more tanks in forward area at present.

Enemy seems to be concentrating his German troops estimated at perhaps 15,000 at Agedabia, which is also being used as base of operations by his fighter aircraft. Italian troops are believed to be still in Benghazi area and to north-east. Unconfirmed reports state some Germans still at Maraua thirty miles east of Barce. We recaptured some of our wounded in Derna.

Enemy obviously considerably disorganized and trying his

hardest to get away valuable stores and plant from Benghazi. Seems likely that he will try and hold Agedabia and Agheila for time being at least, particularly as possession of aerodrome in this area is vital to him to cover the withdrawal of his troops.

Our problem now is to get strong enough forces forward to destroy him or envelop him there and to maintain them when they get there. Agedabia is two hundred miles from Tobruk and three hundred from Railhead as the crow flies. We have plenty of troops available but maintenance governs everything. Every nerve is being strained to solve the problem.

Our air force continue to hit the enemy heavily and continuously and yesterday were most active on road Agedabia-Agheila shooting up lorry columns carrying troops moving westwards and inflicting serious losses on the enemy. The way in which Air Marshal Coningham has moved his fighter landing grounds forward on the heels of the forward troops is most striking and exhilarating.

*General Rommel to Frau Rommel*

22 December 1941

Retreat to Agedabia! You can't imagine what it's like. Hoping to get the bulk of my force through and make a stand somewhere. Little ammunition and petrol. No air support. Quite the reverse with the enemy. . . .<sup>1</sup>

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

22 December 1941

*General.* The main issue still remains the same, in my opinion, to destroy everything of the *Germans* before they can escape into Tripolitania. I feel myself that with the forces he has available, he will do all he can today, as it appears to me he did yesterday, to cover the withdrawal southwards of all he can save from the Benghazi area by holding us off on the general line of the escarpment from Regima to Antelat. . . . It is extremely difficult, because of the long distances, to maintain communications with the forward troops and on this account I find myself often lacking in knowledge as to what exactly they are doing and where they have got to. I was able, however, yesterday, to get a very clear picture of what happened on the 20th, which clearly shows that the enemy retreat from Mechili was in great disorder, and that he abandoned much material, much equipment, and that the 7th Armd Div. overran many prisoners. We cannot be bothered with them just now. In general, therefore, the situation appears to be good so

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 175. Rommel, in a moment of depression, was ignoring the truth about the supply situation.

long as the Panzer Group carries out the orders that it has received to cover Benghazi and the Fleiderkorp, in which case I have great hopes of destroying the lot. So today seems to be a critical day once more; critical because it will produce either complete destruction of the Germans or will show me that they have succeeded once again in getting out of the box. I pray the latter may not occur again. . . .

*General Rommel to Frau Rommel* 23 December 1941

. . . It looks as though we'll succeed in extricating ourselves from the envelopment and getting the main body back. It'll be a great Christmas treat for me if it does come off. How modest one becomes! . . .<sup>1</sup>

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck* 24 December 1941

*General Situation.* Everything is concentrated, so far as I am concerned, on the battle now going on between Benghazi and Agedabia. From the information we have, the enemy still appears to be in a very bad way as regards his petrol stocks; both aviation and otherwise. Our maintenance is, needless to say, a difficulty, but I feel extremely lucky in having Charles Miller<sup>2</sup>, who really is quite outstanding.

I wonder if there is a turn in the tide coming? What does this sudden action by Hitler mean in taking over command of the Army forces? Their scale of air attack everywhere, so far as I can gather, has been reduced enormously, for there is scarcely anything now directed against Britain, their efforts from Crete against Tobruk are infinitesimal and I am beginning to wonder whether in fact they will be able to keep up any large scale of air attack against Benghazi once that place is in our hands. The greatest menace to our supply lines here is the large increase in the number of enemy submarines operating in the Eastern Mediterranean. We lost one ship this morning, I understand, on its way back from Tobruk full of Italian prisoners and there is another one sending out S.O.S.s at the moment which is due for Derna. Whether this latter is due to enemy action or merely to breakdown I do not know, but hope it may be the latter. . . .

*Benghazi Battlefield.* . . . Personally, my greatest anxiety at the moment is whether we have really got enough troops forward in

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Brig. (later Maj.-Gen.) C. H. Miller, Principal Administrative Officer of Eighth Army.

the fighting area to destroy the enemy. It is once more a balance of maintenance and speed, but with resolute leaders, which we have, and the taking of risks, I believe we can achieve a good deal. Regima and Benina were reported occupied yesterday afternoon and the 7th Armd Div. hoped to enter Benghazi last night. There is no confirmation of this yet but it would be a good Christmas present I think for the British public. . . .

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*24 December 1941*

Cairo 16.00 hours G.M.T. First Royal Dragoons occupied Benghazi this morning. The Army of the Nile sends you hearty greetings for Christmas.

Auchinleck had sent up some rum, a turkey and some letters to Ritchie and his mess. Frau Rommel had sent a bottle of champagne to her husband, which he took across to the Intelligence truck and shared with Colonel Westphal and one or two of his juniors.

*General Rommel to Frau Rommel*

*25 December 1941*

. . . The British were badly disappointed at Benghazi in neither cutting us off, nor finding petrol and rations. Cruewell has been made a full Panzer General. He really deserves it. I'm up at the front every day, regrouping and organizing our forces. I hope we now succeed in making a stand.<sup>1</sup>

Rommel's hope was amply fulfilled. Auchinleck's despatch closes this part of the story:

Agedabia was a naturally strong position and difficult to turn, and, after the 22nd Armoured Brigade had had an unsuccessful encounter with enemy tanks on December 28 and again on the 30th, it became clear that we needed fresh troops if we were to advance farther. The tanks of the armoured brigade were mechanically unsound after the long march across the desert, and this was largely responsible for their lack of success in these engagements. The 1st Armoured Division reached Antelat on January 6, and the next morning patrols reported that the enemy had withdrawn from Agedabia.

While these operations were going on in eastern Cyrenaica, General Norrie was eliminating the enemy still holding out on the Egyptian frontier. It was of the utmost importance that direct road communication through Sollum should be quickly restored, as the long detour across the desert was most uneconomical in

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

motor transport, upon a sufficiency of which depended our ability to maintain an adequate force round Agedabia and Agheila.

On January 2 Bardia was captured by the 2nd South African Division, supported by the 1st Army Tank Brigade, after a sustained bombardment from land, sea and air. Sollum was captured on January 11, and on the 17th the last remaining garrison at Halfaya surrendered. With that the first stage of the Libyan offensive was successfully concluded.

It was by no means extravagant to claim that 'Crusader' in the end—for all its optimism at the beginning, its grim loss of illusions, its moments of supreme danger, its complexity and its fluidity—was a victory, though of necessity incomplete. The Axis losses were 33,000 killed, wounded or taken prisoner (13,000 Germans and 20,000 Italians), and 300 tanks. Eighth Army lost 2,908 officers and men killed, 7,339 wounded, and 7,457 missing, a total of 17,704, and 278 tanks. In the middle of January, Eighth Army stood at Agheila, on the threshold of Tripolitania, the farthest point of O'Connor's advance a year earlier. If many other mischances had not intervened, who can tell whether this would have been—as it proved to be—the end of the desert road for Auchinleck and for Ritchie? Winston Churchill, in the midst of immensely troublous preoccupations, was gratified by the victory and generous in his praise; but he thought then, and he continued to think, that Auchinleck had waited too long for it. There must inevitably be some imponderables in an argument of this order and on this plane of strategy. It is necessary often in the study of the history of war to weigh the known against the unknown. But here the controlling factors are known. The prime causes of any tardiness in the launching of 'Crusader' were the severe losses in men and equipment in Greece and Crete, and the premature and unsuccessful launching of 'Battleaxe' by Wavell at the insistence of the Prime Minister. It will be seen what befell Auchinleck when in the spring of 1942 he bowed to the pressure which he had resisted in the autumn of 1941.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### January, the Fateful Month

GENERAL MARTEL, the tank enthusiast and expert, arrived in Cairo on a liaison visit on Christmas Day. He brought with him a letter from the C.I.G.S., written on December 10.

Brooke's letters to Auchinleck differed in quality from Dill's. They were friendly and helpful, but read many years afterwards they have an inner reserve which, though it would be harsh to describe it as chilling, does not immediately warm and fortify in the way that was habitual to Dill when he wrote to Auchinleck.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*10 December 1941*

I am delighted that your operations are turning out so successfully and feel certain that you must have had some anxious moments. I consider that, at present, successes in northern Africa are of primary importance. The more we can clear this northern coast the better from every point of view.

I do not like very much the present boundary between your Command and the Indian Command. In the event of a German advance through Turkey and the Caucasus it would mean divided control of the Force opposed to the Germans. From my study of the problem up to date, I am inclined to think that your Command should extend to include Iraq and Western Persia. From an administrative point of view this sub-division certainly seems the best. What are your feelings about it; will your hands be too full? We should, of course, visualize the possibility of operations in Tripoli being satisfactorily completed and a defensive front established. I should very much like to know what your feelings are on this point, as I believe you consider you might be overloaded. On the other hand, Archie Wavell had the Western Desert, Abyssinia, and Greek fronts all at the same time; this may have been too much. . . .

Auchinleck dealt with the question of the boundary between his Command and Wavell's in a long signal, dated December 25, which

he addressed both to Brooke and to Churchill. It weighed, in the manner of a judge's summing-up, all the factors for and against any change in the boundary. The argument was subtle and supple. In the previous spring Auchinleck, as Commander-in-Chief in India, had been opposed to the transfer of operational control in Iraq from India to Middle East; and Wavell, as Commander-in-Chief in Middle East, had been reluctant to undertake any operation there at all, because of his other commitments. London had insisted on the transfer. Now, Wavell's and Auchinleck's positions were reversed. Both were hard-pressed and were going to be much more so in the immediate future. If there was a wry and bitter flavour now about the Prime Minister's idea of Wavell sitting under the pagoda tree in India, there was more than a hint of irony in the force with which Auchinleck argued that Iraq and Persia should be part of his Command. He concluded his careful assessment:

To sum up. First, I believe the operational reasons for placing Iraq and Persia under Middle East are weighty and urgent. Second, the difficulty and inconvenience of adjusting the administrative and financial complications caused by a transfer to Middle East will be great but not insuperable. Third, the Government of India and Indian public opinion generally are likely to oppose the change strenuously and the feeling thus created may affect India's willingness to provide troops and material not only for Iraq and Persia, but also for the Middle East on the same generous scale as hitherto.

The change was duly made early in the New Year. In fact, because there were no operations in this theatre, the controversy became subsequently of academic interest only; but at the time, the thought of a German thrust on the northern front was a continual, major anxiety to the Commanders-in-Chief, both in India and in Middle East; relief came only after the German defeat at Stalingrad.

Meanwhile, Wavell was swept into the storm and sorrow of the Far Eastern collapse; and Auchinleck's difficulties and problems in the Middle East were a reflection and a consequence of that collapse.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*27 December 1941*

My heartiest congratulations to you, Ritchie and the Army and Air Force of the Nile on re-entry of Benghazi and on great victory won by so much hard fighting and skill chiefly now manifesting itself in Cyrenaica.

## JANUARY, THE FATEFUL MONTH

I have a hard request to make to you. We concentrated everything on your battle with results that we are now desperately short in new theatre which Japanese attack has opened. I think without compromising 'Acrobat' you should be able to spare at once for Malaya and Singapore:

(a) A force of American tanks even if its full strength only amounted to a hundred.

(b) Apart from Blenheims, etc. already on way four squadrons of Hurricanes are needed urgently in Singapore. Our ability to bring further reinforcements depends on our getting a sufficient air force there in good time to protect sea approaches. At present our old-quality aircraft are knocked about by Japanese sea-borne fighters. Only air power at Singapore and Johore can keep door open, and if door is shut fortress will fall and this would take the bloom off our Libyan successes. We are examining sending *Indomitable* to pick up these four squadrons at Kilindini, by which means they could be flown off her deck to Singapore before end of January. Pray ask Air Marshal Tedder from me to study this most earnestly.

It has occurred to me that you might send some of your damaged tanks to India for repair, thus relieving your workshops which must be congested and could not in any case cure these tanks for some months. In India, however, when repaired they will form training nucleus for armoured units we are forming. Please explore this idea with General Wavell.

Auchinleck's immediate response to this request was a postscript to a signal which was just going out, giving the operational position on that morning.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*27 December 1941*

Indications are that main German forces are in position round Agedabia with probably some Italians as well and it seems likely that they will make a stand there. Meanwhile our 22nd Armoured Bde, Guards Bde Group and Jalo force are closing in on Agedabia from north-east and south and reconnoitring routes of attack. Jalo force is in touch with enemy's south-western flank and has successfully harassed enemy movement on Agedabia-Agheila road.

Clearing-up operations continue in area Barce-Benghazi-Ghemines-Solluch.

I am satisfied that General Ritchie is doing all he can in face of great maintenance obstacles. He is determined to destroy the



remnant of the enemy forces and hopes that by standing at Agedabia enemy will give him the chance. Whatever success we may have had here is due to your determination to give us the means and to your insistence on our getting them. We have tried to use them to the best advantage but the victory is yours and everyone here knows it.

Your telegram of today just arrived and is receiving immediate attention. We are all out to help.

Churchill himself was now in Washington, as restlessly active, as zealous in his search for new ways of attacking the enemy as he had ever been. Auchinleck, in the middle of a conference of Army commanders from all over his enormous parish (with the exception of Ritchie, who was still fighting his battle in the Western Desert), was bombarded with telegrams. They tumbled in so fast that it was difficult to keep pace with all their consequences and implications.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*27 December 1941*

I have obtained here two important decisions. Firstly, the sending of four American divisions immediately into Northern Ireland thus liberating at least two fully trained British divisions for overseas.

Secondly, American bomber squadrons are coming over to attack Germany from British Isles.

Thirdly, and most important for you, the Americans are very ready to come in on a rigorous application of 'Gymnast' so that if you can arrive frontiers of Tunis we will put such a screw on Vichy or on French North Africa as will give us the best chance of bringing them over to our side. Not only British 'Gymnast' forces but some highly trained American divisions may be thrown into the scale. . . .

The last days of the old year and the first of the new were grim indeed. Eighth Army had shot its bolt. The reduction of the frontier fortresses by 30th Corps was taking longer than had been anticipated; and hundreds of miles westward at Agedabia Ritchie's hopes of finally cornering Rommel were not fulfilled.

For ten days from Boxing Day onwards 13th Corps were held up at Agedabia, where Rommel had assembled a fair-sized force to cover his preparations of positions at El Agheila. Administratively, the British were stretched to their utmost. Rations were short; so

## JANUARY, THE FATEFUL MONTH

were supplies and ammunition. There was a tendency to believe that Rommel was in similar or greater difficulties, but the truth was that his supply situation was rapidly improving. The country round Agedabia—a mixture of swamps and soft sand-dunes—was as helpful to Rommel in defence as it was trying to Godwin-Austen in attack.

The Guards Brigade and 22nd Armoured Brigade, which were Godwin-Austen's two forward formations, had engagements with Rommel's armour on December 26 and 27, the results of which could hardly be regarded as satisfactory.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

*30 December 1941*

*Armoured Engagement South of Agedabia on December 27.*

I received your message on this subject last night and am not surprised at the uneasiness that our Sitrep caused you. I am sorry that this happened but as a result of my enquiries yesterday and reports received at 13th Corps I feel much less unhappy about what happened that day. In fact, on balance I think we inflicted greater casualties on the enemy though he is in possession of the battlefield, and this is the most unsatisfactory feature. . . .

I must admit to having some misgivings myself about our tactics and the general employment of our armed forces and I have discussed this at considerable length with Strafer and Martel. The facts are that:

(a) We are outgunned in tanks and until this is righted, which will not be until we get a six-pounder, our tactics must be modified accordingly.

(b) The British cruiser tanks are not robust enough in my opinion to withstand the rigours of campaigning in this type of country. The M3 American tank is on the right lines. One might well describe it as an 'owner-driver' type of tank and it is mechanically miles ahead of ours. But as a fighting machine it is not, and it is certainly not up to the Germans'. It is, in fact, a light tank and nothing more.

There is no doubt that in this campaign the gun is everything and the tank, in my opinion, should be built round the gun, not the reverse. I know you will be seeing 'Q' Martel and Strafer Gott shortly and will get their views on this matter. . . .

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*  
*Agedabia.*

*31 December 1941*

. . . The German Force continued its advance north yesterday and the latest information I have is that by 19.00 hrs last night

it had halted about two miles south of Bir el Uesceca, with a reconnaissance pushed a little farther north. I understand the 22nd Armoured Brigade started yesterday morning with some fifty-five to fifty-eight runners and it was reported at dusk last night that only twenty-one of these remained. I have no details of what happened apart from the fact that the brigade claim six enemy tanks destroyed, and until I have been up to clear the situation, as I will do this morning, I am not taking great account of the reports I have had so far. But, nevertheless, it seems obvious that the 22nd Armoured Brigade can only be looked upon as a fraction of a fighting armoured brigade group. They have now been withdrawn round the left flank of the Guards Brigade and the Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division arrives in that area too this morning, which it should do about 11.00 hrs.

Though I am distressed about the undoubted minor tactical success that the enemy has achieved here, in general, it does not seem to me that the situation is at all bad. To me it appears very similar to the situation that existed before we pushed the enemy out of the Tobruk area and we were able to build up a striking force on the El Gubi area. This time it can be done on the Msus area and I cannot help feeling that our situation, compared with that of Tobruk, is far easier.

The German maintenance situation is very difficult and, provided we make use of the desert . . . I see no reason why we should not hit him a proper crack again once we are able to maintain sufficient forces forward. . . .

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

*1 January 1942*

Thank you very much for . . . the excellent letters you have been sending me. They are most valuable and I am eternally grateful to you for taking the trouble and sparing the time to write them. I am afraid I have not done the same by you, but lately I have been very rushed and still am. There are a lot of big questions to be settled, and the War Office is being irritatingly slow in answering queries or giving decisions—the reason may be found in the Prime Minister's absence in America.

I agree that our tanks are outgunned by the German tanks, but surely superiority in numbers should counter-balance this to some extent, and the number of German tanks with the heavier gun in them cannot be so great?

I agree, too, about the cruiser being too complicated, and delicate a machine for the rough conditions of the Near and Middle East, and that the American M3s, though mechanically

excellent, are not comparable to our cruisers or the German medium tanks as fighting machines. Still, we have got to make do with what we have got, and the Boche has got to be beaten. We are both determined on that I know! If we are to add to our inferiority in material an apparent inferiority in leadership, then we shall be in a bad way and will not deserve to win. Mind you, I do not say our leadership and tactics are inferior. I am not in a position to pass any judgment, still less a hasty judgment, on anyone. All the same, I have a most uncomfortable feeling that the Germans outwit and outmanoeuvre us as well as outshooting us, and I must know as soon as possible if this is so.

If it is, then we must find new leaders at once. No personal considerations or the possession of such qualities as courage and popularity must be allowed to stand in the way. Commanders who consistently have their brigades shot away from under them, even against a numerically inferior enemy, are expensive luxuries, much too expensive in present circumstances.

I am not criticizing any particular individual at the moment, but I do think the events of the last week call for a full explanation as to the causes of the failure of the 22nd Armoured Brigade to hold the enemy, much less defeat him, and I hope you will be able to produce it for me. You may put on anyone you like—Willoughby Norrie or Messervy or Gott, or anyone else—to go into the matter, should you think such a course necessary. If our present leaders are too old or too rigid to learn from experience or from the Boche, then we must get others—not necessarily from the Armoured Corps at all; in fact on present form it seems unlikely that we shall find them in that corps unless we go right down in the junior ranks. I may be maligning good men, and I do not want to do that, but a remedy has got to be found. British soldiers with inferior tools have often beaten thoroughly and decisively enemies much better equipped than they were in the past, and they will do it again *if properly led*.

I am very glad to hear that you think the situation at Benghazi is better than appeared at first. As you say, everything depends on opening this port quickly, and I rub that into all concerned here daily, and shall go on doing so!

Petrol is the very devil, and I agree with all you say about the expendable tin and the deplorable wastage due to the rough desert going. . . .

Godwin-Austen came to the conclusion after the action of December 30 that 22nd Armoured Brigade was no longer fit for

action. It was relieved by 7th Support Group, and Godwin-Austen 'had to content himself with harassing the enemy until further troops arrived'.<sup>1</sup>

Rommel was not seriously harassed. He had got himself the breathing space he wanted; he was able without undue discomfort to disengage and regroup all his formations on the Agheila line by January 12. This was to nobody's liking, and, as will be seen, it made Churchill (who was still in the United States) extremely angry. It is, however, quite clear that even while Rommel was in the process of making his final withdrawal to Agheila, Auchinleck was far from being complacent or from lacking in any intention to maintain the offensive if he possibly could.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

*4 January 1942*

... We don't want the enemy to go until we are in a position to follow him up hard and keep him on the run. That time certainly has not yet arrived unless he is completely demoralized and incapable of fighting back. I see no signs of this at present and I gather you do not either. I sometimes feel that Godwin-Austen is a little apt to take too rosy a view of a situation. This is a fault on the right side, but Rommel is not an enemy whom he or anyone else can afford to underestimate. He is a clever tactician though I have doubts about his ability as a strategist! If the 2nd Armoured Brigade is no better tactically than the 22nd Brigade appears to have been, it may very well be that they need more training. I hope they are hard at it now. I have sent you a telegram asking if we can help by sending you Gott or anyone else who can show them what is needed.

I suppose there is a possibility that Rommel might stage a counter-offensive with the object of throwing us back and possibly recapturing Benghazi. I do not myself think it is likely or that he would get very far with it. All the same, it would be quite typical of him, and, if he did attempt it, he would make sure that the force he used was properly equipped, supplied and handled. . . .

On January 9 Auchinleck cabled to the Prime Minister in Washington a list of the Axis dispositions as far as they were known to Eighth Army on that day. On January 10 he told Churchill that the Guards Brigade Group—two battalions—were still held up some twelve miles south-west of Agedabia.

'It was not difficult for me with my map-room at the White House

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, *Despatch*, p. 39.

functioning,' Churchill wrote long afterwards, 'to see what these innocent-looking telegrams meant.'<sup>1</sup>

The first of countless thunderbolts was now launched. The Prime Minister was instantly precipitated back into the touchy, suspicious mood of the previous autumn.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

11 January 1942

I fear this means that bulk of seven and a half enemy divisions have got away round the corner and will now be retreating directly along their communications. I note also that nine merchant ships of 10,000 tons are reported to have reached Tripoli safely. It was understood you believed your advance down Trigh el Abd would certainly cut off Rommel's Italian infantry, but now it appears they are out of net. How does all this affect 'Acrobat'? I am sure you and your armies did all in human power, but we must face facts as they are, which greatly influence both 'Gymnast' and 'Super-Gymnast'.<sup>2</sup>

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

12 January 1942

I do not think it can be said that the bulk of the enemy divisions have evaded us. It is true that he still speaks in terms of divisions but they are divisions only in name. For instance, we know that the strength of the 90th German Light Division originally 9,000, now 3,500, and has only one field gun left.

I estimate that not more than one-third of original German-Italian forces got away round the corner totalling 17,000 Germans, 18,000 Italians. These are much disorganized, short of senior officers, short of material and due to our continuous pressure are tired and certainly not as strong as their total strength of 35,000 might be thought to indicate.

I have reason to believe that six ships recently reached Tripoli averaging 7,200 tons.

I am convinced that we should press forward with 'Acrobat' for many reasons, not the least in order that Germany may continue to be attacked on two fronts, Russia and Libya. I promise you I will not be led into any rash adventure nor will General Ritchie, but in view of the heartening news from the Russian front I feel that we should do all we can to maintain the pressure in Libya. We have very full and interesting records of daily conversations between our prisoners Generals von Ravenstein and

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> The same operation as 'Gymnast', but larger and with American as well as British forces.

Schmidt. Making all allowances for mental depression natural in prisoners of war there is no doubt that German morale is beginning to feel the strain not only in Libya but in Germany. They speak freely also of great losses in the recent fighting, mismanagement and disorganization and above all of dissatisfaction with Rommel's leadership. I am convinced the enemy is hard-pressed more than we dared think perhaps.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

13 January 1942

Very pleased with your message of January 12. Am showing it to President today.

I am sure you are quite right to push on and bid highly for decision in battle on Agheila-Marada front. Will support you whatever the result.

On January 12 Auchinleck wrote the Prime Minister one of his long, detailed letters—the first for many weeks, indeed, as he admitted, since the beginning of 'Crusader'. First he gave Churchill a careful, cogent analysis of 'Crusader', based on all that he himself had absorbed in the eventful weeks that had passed since November 18. He went on to reiterate, in an expanded form, the arguments which he had advanced in his response, on that same morning, to the Prime Minister's thunderbolt. He continued:

I think General Ritchie ought to be able to concentrate a strong enough force forward to push Rommel out of Agheila or to surround him there. We have a complete brigade of medium tanks not yet committed to battle, and decided air superiority. I feel that viewing the war as a whole, it would be a grave mistake to relax our efforts to defeat the enemy in Libya. From the local angle, it is in any event essential that we should get Agheila whether we go beyond it or not.

If by any chance we have to break off the offensive on the borders of Cyrenaica, we must at all costs secure a position which can be held, and held indefinitely, against a possible counter-offensive by the enemy. Such a position was not secured last year when Rommel hustled us back to Tobruk and the frontier. It is not necessary for me to presume to explain to you that such a position must cover the routes leading across the desert from Sollum and Siwa towards it, and for this reason it must be well 'round the corner'. The best defensive position is that on the line of the marshes west of Agheila, where there is plenty of water. It will be necessary also to secure Marada, a small oasis seventy

miles south of Agheila, so as to secure our southern flank and prevent its use by the enemy.

I submit, therefore, that we must go on and at least capture Agheila. Having got to it, it will then be possible to reconsider the desirability and feasibility of a further advance. . . .

The diversions and withdrawals from this theatre for the re-inforcement of the Far East must naturally cause us considerable concern, but I realize the urgency of the need and the supreme necessity of holding on to Singapore. I hope we will. We are straining every nerve to get the Australian divisions and the tank brigade away at the earliest possible moment. I dare not leave Syria void of troops, and am recalling the 50th Division from Iraq for this purpose, and am also moving up from Palestine the 9th Australian Division, which is still re-equipping and reorganizing after the siege of Tobruk. I have in hand the 70th Division, also re-equipping and reorganizing after Tobruk, and the New Zealand Division, undergoing the same process after the battles of Sidi Rezegh, but I hope I shall not be asked to spare any more troops.

I realize that the menace to the Caucasus has receded, and that an attack on Anatolia cannot materialize until the Germans can withdraw divisions from the Russian front; all the same, we should be most unwise, I think, to comfort ourselves with the belief that the threat to Egypt and the Persian Gulf, by way of Anatolia and the Caucasus, cannot take shape this year. . . .

When, in a field commander, do the valuable qualities of confidence and the will to victory in the face of obstacles and difficulties merge into and become the dangerous defects of over-optimism and complacency? Rommel was clearly over-confident when on the night of November 24 he spurred his armoured divisions into their fruitless 'dash for the Wire'; his mood can be seen as a manifestation of the elation of victory, but it lost him the victory which had seemed so near. Was Auchinleck over-confident in mid-January? He was not of a temperament to be unduly elated by victory. He served, however, a political master who had shown himself to be almost feverishly impatient for a continued advance, no matter that the cost. 'Acrobat' and 'Gymnast' (and now there was 'Super-Gymnast' as well) were in the forefront of Auchinleck's mind no less than of Churchill's. If at the beginning of January, with nearly a month of victory and advance fresh in everyone's memory, he had shown a marked desire to be cautious, to build up his formations, his supplies and his communications as he had done the previous autumn, it is arguable that he would have been subjected, once more, to the same



process of rebuking, prodding, incessant and impatient enquiries. His intuition had brought him to feel himself only too well into the Prime Minister's mind. He was no longer the cautious, canny general whom Churchill had chided so mercilessly in September. He had learned incaution in a hard school, and he was an apt—too apt—pupil.

This is the explanation of, though not the excuse for, his confidence in January—and it was always a confidence mitigated by a realism about the strategic situation as a whole for which he subsequently received little credit. It is true, too, that his confidence was shared by his subordinate commanders and his staff; and in them it lacked the counter-balance of caution with which both his experience and his intuition had endowed Auchinleck.

If the sequence of serious reverses and retreats in Cyrenaica in the spring of 1942 is to be seen in a proper light, certain relevant factors must be considered. They are psychological rather than sheerly military. The Prime Minister ardently desired a major victory in North Africa; Auchinleck was just as eager to give him that victory. But he lacked the men and the tools with which to carry out the tasks which he was set. As was Wavell in the same theatre of war a year earlier, he was bidden to accomplish the impossible, and given nothing with which to do it; and for this, as was Wavell before him, he was condemned.

The simple truth was that it was strategically unsound and tactically unfeasible even to begin to plan and prepare for 'Acrobat' in January 1942. The ghost of this offensive that never was haunted Auchinleck and haunted Ritchie for many weeks to come; itself an illusory hope, it mocked and diminished a real achievement which ought to have been consolidated, not swept away.

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Neil Ritchie was a cheerful extrovert. If he had been given to the sombre, speculative introversion and remorseless self-examination which Alan Brooke masked behind his impatient, decisive manner, the situation of Eighth Army at the beginning of the new year—from the point of view of tactical control no less than that of administration and supply—could almost have given him a nightmare. 30th Corps were methodically but slowly breaking down the resistance of the Axis garrisons.<sup>1</sup> 13th Corps, with their Headquarters

<sup>1</sup> When Halfaya finally surrendered on January 17 Auchinleck received, ironically enough, a brief, characteristic telegram from Churchill: 'Hearty congratulations on another brilliant and timely success.'

near Msus, were spread out over a large part of Cyrenaica; the Guards Brigade and the Support Group faced the Axis defences on the Brega line; the 1st Armoured Brigade, lately disembarked and even now far from fully trained to the shocks and stresses of tank warfare at this time, were at Agedabia; there was an infantry brigade in Benghazi (which was taking longer than had been hoped to get into working order as a port); and the 4th Indian Division, the best, most battle-tested formation in the whole theatre, under a new, energetic, resourceful and highly intelligent commander, Major-General (later Lieutenant-General Sir Francis) Tuker, were at Barce. General Herbert Lumsden, who had come to the Middle East as commander of 1st Armoured Division, was wounded in an air attack a few days after he arrived in the forward area, and was replaced by General Messervy.

Ritchie maintained his flow of full, regular letters to the Commander-in-Chief. They concerned many details of redeployment, of only transient importance, until this crucial letter:

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

*14 January 1942*

... It would not be safe to bank on being able to start an offensive against the enemy's present positions until about February 15. I hate to have to admit it but I do not see how, in the present maintenance situation, we are likely to be in a position to undertake offensive operations on a large scale much before this date. In matter of actual fact I think one could take a degree of risk over the reserves and could possibly start about the 11th or 12th. So much depends on Benghazi and the weather there, which until the last two days has been quite disgracefully bad. It is a rotten port from the point of view of weather. Worst of all, of course, is that the enemy may go again...<sup>1</sup>

Some days were to pass before Ritchie received an answer to this proposition; and in that interval Auchinleck pondered, as realistically as he could, not simply the tactical question of Ritchie resuming his offensive, but his own vast strategic responsibilities. The facts which he had to face were by no means reassuring. He faced them alone. Churchill's description of January 1942 as 'this fateful month' was fair. But that well-knit, harmonious structure of the High Command, of which in earlier months he had been so proud, was now broken up and in process of radical reorganization,

<sup>1</sup> The final sentence was written in Gen. Ritchie's own hand, as an afterthought—but an afterthought which, if followed up, might have prevented a great deal of trouble.

as a result both of the entry of the United States into the war as a full ally, and of the removal of Dill. He himself hurried off to Washington, then had a well-earned rest in Florida, and then flew home from Bermuda. Brooke, needing time to get a grasp of the multifarious aspects of his enormous task, had to address himself day after day to the quite insoluble problems of the Far East. Wavell, in India, was battling in a sea of his own troubles. Auchinleck, with none of that torrent of counsel and guidance from London which he had experienced before and was to experience again, knew himself charged with the defence of the fulcrum of it all.

So far as the Army was concerned, he believed that he needed for the defence of the Middle East as a whole, including Persia and Iraq, five armoured and seventeen infantry divisions. In January he realized that he could count on no more than three and a half armoured divisions and thirteen infantry divisions—a twenty-five per cent deficiency on his minimum requirements. The Royal Air Force, Tedder pointed out, would be twenty squadrons short of the eighty-two needed. In the passage in his despatch which recorded these strategic difficulties Auchinleck added a masterpiece of understatement: 'Our naval forces also needed strengthening.'<sup>1</sup>

The 18th Infantry Division never came to the Middle East, but from Cape Town was diverted to a different—and, in the end, pitiable—fate in Singapore. The 17th Indian Division, also due, was held in India. In response to the appeal of the Chiefs of Staff for help in the Far East, Auchinleck sent off two armoured regiments, with 160 tanks, and a complete armoured brigade headquarters and all the signals, workshop and maintenance units required.

Early in January he was told that the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions, with corps troops and maintenance and base organizations, were to be sent from his Command to the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>2</sup> He was also warned that the 9th—the third and last remaining Australian Division in the Middle East—now in Syria, might soon be needed for the defence of their homeland.

Finally, the strengthening of the Axis potential for attack in the Mediterranean theatre—and Hitler's imperious wishes conveyed to Kesselring—meant that Malta, a vital bastion of the Middle East, was in grave danger. He was ordered to send an anti-aircraft regiment and two squadrons of tanks to the island, only half of which reached their destination.

Auchinleck was told that all his losses and unfulfilled expectations

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill has told the full story of the melancholy dispute leading up to this decision; *op. cit.* Vol. IV, Ch. I.

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would be made up as soon as possible; but it must be realized that his forces had been suddenly reduced far below the level of safety for compliance with all the calls that might be made on him. He now regarded his responsibilities as being divided under two main headings: the Western Front (Cyrenaica and now Malta), and the Northern Front (the enormous arc of territory extending from northern Persia, through northern Iraq to Anatolia). It was to this Front that in the early weeks of January 1942 he devoted some close and well-merited attention. It was to be defended by two somewhat skeletal formations—the Ninth Army, based in Syria, commanded by General Wilson, and the Tenth Army, based in Iraq, commanded by Lieutenant-General Quinan.

Whereas in December Auchinleck thought that he could muster for this huge Northern Front two and a half armoured and eleven infantry divisions (having allowed for the Western—or Desert—Front one armoured and two infantry divisions), in January he realized that this not very impressive total would be reduced by two infantry divisions. It would be needless to dwell on the current shortage of tanks, armoured cars and motor transport. Auchinleck had to balance the immediate commitment in Cyrenaica against the developing threat in the north. He made his decisions in the light of the situation as he saw it then, and he was subsequently severely criticized for them.

It is important, therefore, to realize how isolated Auchinleck was at this time. Letters between London and Cairo were subjected to even longer delays than usual. A single example should suffice: a long letter from Auchinleck to the C.I.G.S. written on December 28 was answered by Brooke on January 21, and this answer reached Cairo on February 11. Telegraphic communication—with the enormous pressure on signalling facilities, London–Washington, Washington–London–Cairo, Washington–London–Delhi, Washington–London–Singapore—was fitful. And even the exchange of letters and telegrams between the C.I.G.S. and the Commander-in-Chief was of a strangely barren character, concerned in large measure with the details of reorganization inside and outside G.H.Q., and with doubtless necessary, but unhappily sterile analyses of recent shortcomings. There were too few indications that the position of Auchinleck's Command in the great strategic landscape was receiving from the C.I.G.S. the close and serious attention which it merited, which it had undoubtedly received from Dill.

It would be improper to attach blame to Brooke for this bleak—and, as it proved, unfortunate—period of disconnexion in what ought to have been a close association of understanding and

sympathy. His difficulties in this period have been vividly depicted by Sir Arthur Bryant. Auchinleck, however, on his side, was just as harshly pressed. So indeed was everyone in what Sir Arthur has rightly called 'the winter of our discontent'.

The story of the consequences of this accumulation of unexpected setbacks and disappointments, material deficiencies and psychological pressures must now be told. They were all but the prelude to a lamentable series of misfortunes.

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On January 19 Ritchie was given a formal response to his letter of the 14th. It took the shape of an operational instruction, No. 110,<sup>1</sup> setting out for Ritchie and for General Holmes, the Commander of British Troops in Egypt, the Commander-in-Chief's policy for his Western Front, should circumstances make necessary a withdrawal from Cyrenaica. Two days later he sent a copy of it to the C.I.G.S., with a short covering note. 'Needless to say, I hope the necessity will never arise, and this instruction is merely to ensure that reasonable precautions are taken. These precautions are in the nature of an insurance.'

The operational instruction began with the words: 'My present intention is to continue the offensive in Libya and the objective remains Tripoli.'

It went on to lay down a well-conceived, orderly axis of withdrawal, should this be forced on Eighth Army: Agheila-Agedabia-Bir Ben Gania-Sidi Omar, i.e., a southern route back to the Egyptian frontier, with as its ultimate destination two main defended localities, Capuzzo-Sollum-Halfaya, and Mersa Matruh.

In view of all that happened afterwards two paragraphs were of impressive significance:

(6) It is not my intention to try to hold permanently Tobruk or any other locality west of the frontier.

(10) Work will be continued in accordance with the original plans on the El Alamein position as opportunity offers, until it is completed.

It is necessary to reiterate the precautionary nature of this insurance policy, and to emphasize that, in view of what happened, it would have been recklessly irresponsible of the Commander-in-Chief not to have taken out such a policy.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in full by Auchinleck, *Despatch*, Appendix 6, pp. 69-70.

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On January 20 Auchinleck signed a 'Note on Possible Commitments in the Spring of 1942'.<sup>1</sup> These he defined as:

- (a) The defence of our Western Front.
- (b) The defence of the Northern Front, including Cyprus, and probably also including assistance to Turkey.
- (c) The protection of our bases in the Suez Canal and Persian Gulf areas.

He then made a formidable list of the deficiencies in manpower and equipment needed to fulfil these tasks: one and a half armoured divisions, five infantry divisions, nineteen heavy A.A. regiments, and thirty-seven light A.A. regiments. It would be therefore impossible to hold the line as it now stood—stretching from Tabriz through Mosul to the Turco-Syrian frontier—and his only course would be to fall back on to rear defence positions in Persia, central Iraq and southern Syria, there to fight a defensive battle, surrendering to the enemy all air bases and landing grounds north of this line, and thus greatly increasing the enemy's opportunities for heavy air attack on his own bases.

Since the threat on the Northern Front did not, in fact, materialize, Auchinleck might appear to have been over-preoccupied with it, and over-confident in leaving the planning of a limited offensive westward from Agheila to Ritchie.

But eleven days before he signed this note, the C.I.G.S. made this entry in his diary:

9 January 1942. Chiefs of Staff meeting this morning where we had representatives from Middle East to discuss with them the possibility of carrying out 'Acrobat' (i.e. attack on Tripoli) in spite of delays that had occurred in capture of Cyrenaica and new situation in the Far East. In view of the fact that this operation cannot be carried out for six weeks and that during this period reinforcements may well flow into Africa from Italy, I am beginning to wonder whether the operation is on. At any rate I feel that it ought, if possible, to be connected with the operation for occupying North Africa on the invitation of the French. But, first secure your invitation!<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. Appendix 7.

<sup>2</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 289. Bryant points out that five days later Brooke heard that 'Gymnast' had been put off for lack of shipping; he adds: 'The moment for the offensive had passed; the time had come to draw in and hold fast to what was essential until the storm had been weathered and a real counter-offensive was possible.'

Brooke now had time to consider Auchinleck's problems carefully and—like Auchinleck—to weigh the risks on one front against those on the other. But because of the delay in the exchange of letters, the results of his study did not reach Auchinleck until they were almost too late to matter.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

21 January 1942

... We have got an awkward problem in front of us in the shape of 'Acrobat'. The failure to destroy Rommel's force, the time gained by his rearguard actions, the unavoidable delays necessary to stage 'Acrobat', and the reduced strength of naval force in the Eastern Mediterranean, all affect the situation seriously.

The restrictions which the administrative situation imposes on the strength of the force which we can maintain for offensive operations in Tripoli is also a very serious handicap. Against Italians all would be well, but against Germans and with some six weeks to obtain reinforcements, the odds may well be heavily weighted against us when you are in a position to resume the offensive.

From the above I do not suggest that we should not carry out 'Acrobat' as long as there is a reasonable chance of success. On the contrary, I attach the greatest importance to it and all it entails. We should, during the next few weeks, be able to form a fairly accurate estimate as to what reinforcements have got through and what the enemy forces opposed to us consist of. . . .

It is essential that your four Armoured Divisions should be re-equipped and reorganized as quickly as possible to meet any threat that may develop through Turkey or Caucasus later on. I am examining the possibilities of sparing one more Armoured Division from Home Forces for you, which, together with the Indian one, would bring you up to six. This could in any case only be done in lieu of an infantry division, owing to shipping restrictions. . . .

On January 22 Auchinleck went to Haifa to meet Wilson and Quinan and discuss with them the somewhat disquieting conclusions which had emerged from his study of his commitments on the front, the responsibility for whose defence they shared. He returned to Cairo on January 23.

\* \* \*

The blow came, not on the North but on the West. Rommel at

this time was at the peak of his capacity; and at that peak he was a truly formidable fighting commander. He had been defeated in a major campaign; he had staged a long and gruelling retreat, giving his opponent more than one nasty nip or hindlash as he went; at the end of December those of his senior officers who were not dead, seriously wounded or prisoners of war were (as he told his dearest Lu) ill. He himself was extraordinarily resilient; and like Wavell, he could be, when he chose, extremely tight-lipped. Like Wavell in 1940 he was fortunate enough to be fighting in a theatre of war which his High Command, for obvious reasons, considered secondary. He was able, therefore, to concert his plans in complete secrecy. He told nothing to either the German or Italian High Commands.

On January 5 a convoy of ships carrying fifty-five tanks and twenty armoured cars, with anti-tank guns and other miscellaneous supplies, reached Tripoli. 'This,' said Bayerlein, 'was as good as a victory in battle, and Rommel immediately began to think of taking the offensive again. His plans for the reconquest of Cyrenaica were already prepared.'<sup>1</sup>

It was, however, a low-flying reconnaissance by Colonel Westphal (he who in November had incurred Rommel's momentary displeasure by ordering Afrika Korps back from the frontier excursion) which prompted Rommel's decision to act quickly. Westphal reported—only too accurately—on the weakness of the British advanced forces. There was a conference at Panzergruppe Headquarters on January 12, and a plan containing the maximum of surprise for Eighth Army was worked out. The Commander of Afrika Korps was not informed of this plan until January 16 and his divisional commanders were given their orders verbally on January 19. Zero hour was fixed as 18.30 on January 21.<sup>2</sup>

For several days Rommel had been dropping a hint or two to his dearest Lu—the General's private letters were not, it must be assumed, subject to censorship—and on January 21 he wrote to her:

The Army launches its counter-attack in two hours' time. After carefully weighing the pros and cons, I've decided to take the risk. I have complete faith that God is keeping a protective hand over us and that He will grant us victory.<sup>3</sup>

Auchinleck's subsequent summing-up was more laconic:

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45* by Maj.-Gen. F. W. von Mellenthin, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 180.



On January 21 the improbable occurred, and without warning the Axis forces began to advance.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

The events of the next few days were momentous and, from the British point of view, deplorable. Rommel's attack was intended to split—and split it did—the British advanced formations. Secrecy in planning secured surprise; surprise was exploited by flexibility and audacity in action.

Rommel had 111 serviceable tanks in his forward area and twenty-eight in the rear; the Italian Motorized Corps had eighty-nine. 1st Armoured Brigade had some 150 Crusaders. The Axis forces came forward in two groups: Group Marcks (at the head of which went Rommel himself) took the Via Balbia, the coastal road, to Agedabia; the Afrika Korps went east across the desert to the Wadi el Faregh and then turned sharply northward.

Afrika Korps made a slow start across heavy sand-dunes and got into trouble with lack of petrol. However, such British forces as they encountered put up only a weak resistance, and by the end of the first day Afrika Korps had a bag of a good many guns and vehicles. Group Marcks met equally little opposition along the Via Balbia, and was into Agedabia by 11.00 hours on January 22. The Luftwaffe gave strong support, and—under Rommel's imperious direction<sup>2</sup>—the spearhead of this column drove on towards Antelat and Saunnu, pounding mercilessly through British supply columns which scattered in wild confusion, though not quickly enough to prevent the capture of a great many vehicles. Antelat was reached and taken by 15.30, and without stopping the column swept on to Saunnu, regardless of the swiftly approaching dusk. At 19.30 Saunnu fell after a short struggle, and Group Marcks leaguered there, far behind what had been twenty-four hours earlier the British line, and very uncertain itself as to its whereabouts. The spearhead of the 15th Panzer Division reached Antelat after dark; the two panzer divisions attempted to close up, but were delayed by traffic jams.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Some time during this day's engagements the Axis forces were worried about their petrol. A young officer approached Rommel saying, 'Herr General, we need more fuel,' and was told briskly, 'Well, go and get it from the British.'

<sup>3</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45* by Maj.-Gen. F. W. von Mellenthin, p. 86. The German dates and times have been used in this narrative; they are, in general, for the early phases of Rommel's advance, some twenty-four hours ahead of the British official version—including Auchinleck's Despatch—but would seem to be more accurate.

During the night of January 22-23 Rommel issued orders which he hoped would result in 1st Armoured Division, now apparently cut off near Agedabia, being completely surrounded. The Italian Motorized Corps was to hold the Agedabia area, the Afrika Korps was to establish a cordon along the line Agedabia-Antelat-Saunnu, and Group Marcks was to move south-east of Saunnu, thus bringing the noose round the neck of the bag on the east.

It was, as General von Mellenthin has remarked, an ambitious plan; and it was only partially successful. There was, he said, 'a serious lapse in staff-work at Afrika Korps Headquarters',<sup>1</sup> and Saunnu was not occupied by the 21st Panzer Division after Group Marcks left it. The British, von Mellenthin believed, took advantage of this gap to extricate the bulk of 1st Armoured Division.

In the grim atmosphere of confusion and dismay this was hardly how it looked from the British side; and for 1st Armoured Division it was only a reprieve, not an escape. What had happened was that Godwin-Austen, at 30th Corps, realizing that Rommel was attacking in strength, had ordered a withdrawal on the line Agedabia-El Hareiat, and had given Messervy, now commanding 1st Armoured Division, discretion to go farther back on the line Agedabia-Antelat-Msus if he thought it necessary for the security of his force. 4th Indian Division, under General Tuker—he had lately arrived in Middle East from the key post of D.M.T. at G.H.Q. in India—was ordered to stop any advance on Benghazi along the coastal plain.

This was the situation which confronted the Commander-in-Chief when he returned on January 23 from his conference at Haifa.

The Prime Minister had been back at work in London since January 18. Five days later he received what he described later as 'news of an unfavourable character'.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

23 January 1942

It seems clear that Rommel's eastwards move on January 21 was made in anticipation attack by us. Finding only light forces confronting him he evidently decided to push on with intention of disturbing our main L. of C., which he appears to believe rests on Benghazi. During withdrawal on January 21 in difficult sand-dune country south-west of Agedabia columns of the Support Group 1st Armoured Division reported to have lost nine guns and a hundred mechanical transport, also a number of casualties, details as yet unknown.

If Rommel persists in his advance, particularly on the Benghazi

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 87. Rueful consolation for Eighth Army, which firmly believed that only British staff officers blundered.

axis, he is likely to expose his eastward flank to attack by our armour which in that area now amounts to about 150 cruiser and American tanks. The small enemy column which penetrated almost into Antelat last night is presumed to be a Commando.

I realize the public at home may be upset by enemy reoccupying Agedabia, but it may well be that Rommel may be drawn on into a situation unfavourable to him. Rommel's move has held up reconnaissances and other preparations for our planned offensive against Agheila, but as you know prime retarding factor was and still is need for building up adequate reserve in and forward of Benghazi. . . . Am confident that General Ritchie is watching for opportunity to force encounter battle in conditions which may be more favourable to us than those obtaining round Agheila with its swamps and bad going. . . .

The true facts of the situation were by no means evident yet either at Eighth Army Advanced H.Q., which were now at Tmimi, or in Cairo. It is just feasible that, had Auchinleck flown up to Tmimi on the night of January 23, as two months earlier he had flown up to Maddalena, he might have been able to produce cohesion out of mounting chaos. But he did not. Ritchie was quite confident of his own capacity to deal with the attack; he certainly was not thinking defensively when he ought to have been thinking offensively; and there was nobody at hand—nor was there any need for anybody to be at hand—as Galloway had been, to urge that the Commander-in-Chief should come to the rescue. Comprehension of the scale of the setback dawned tardily.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister      24 January 1942. 15.00 hrs.*

. . . Enemy has been able to maintain unexpected strength forward apparently and his initial advance seems to have disconcerted temporarily at any rate our forward troops. These, as you know, were weak and were pushed aside from main road. . . . Once again Rommel has made a bold stroke. . . . His unexpected initial success probably encouraged him, as happened last year, to go farther than he originally intended. But his supply position this time is in no way comparable with last year when he also had fresh troops. The situation has not developed quite as I should have liked but I hope to turn it to our ultimate advantage.

Realizing that there was serious trouble brewing, Auchinleck flew up to Tmimi on the following day. Churchill approved this action. Even when he reached Eighth Army the full, grim picture

was (as will shortly be seen) by no means clear. The simple and bitter facts were that between January 22 and January 23 Rommel inflicted a signal defeat on his opponents, and that his victory culminated in what von Mellenthin has quite fairly described as 'one of the most extraordinary routs of the war'.<sup>1</sup> On January 22-23 1st Armoured Division lost seventy out of its initial strength of 150 tanks.

On the evening of January 23, in one of the odder episodes of this odd campaign, the Italian General, Count Cavallero, arrived at Axis Headquarters, extremely angry about the offensive which Rommel had launched, and ordering him, in the name of the Duce, to 'make it no more than a sortie and come straight back'. Rommel, who was in no mood to stand this kind of pusillanimous behaviour, said that he had made up his mind to go on attacking just as long as his troops and his supplies would allow, and added that only the Führer could change his decision. He appended—as he frequently did—a wounding observation about the Italian part in the battle.

Afrika Korps spent a fruitless day on January 24 'sweeping an empty battlefield', as von Mellenthin put it. On the evening of the 24th Rommel decided to advance on Msus next day. Six miles north-west of Saunnu 15th Panzer Division met what von Mellenthin described as 'very superior tank forces'. They were in fact the remaining eighty tanks of 1st Armoured Division, against which 10th Panzer mustered probably fifty.

It soon became apparent that the British tank units had no battle experience and they were completely demoralized by the onslaught of 15th Panzer. . . . After covering fifty miles in under four hours 15th Panzer reached Msus airfield at 11.00 hours, overwhelming numerous supply columns, and capturing twelve aircraft ready to take off. Further exploitation was impossible, as the division was out of fuel. . . .<sup>2</sup>

1st Armoured Division—in which nobody had greater faith and higher hopes than the Prime Minister himself—was thus totally eliminated as a fighting force within ninety-six hours of its first contact

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 87. Von Mellenthin claims 96 tanks, 38 guns and 190 lorries as the booty of this day. About these figures there are some obvious discrepancies. Liddell Hart, in a note in *The Rommel Papers*, p. 181, says: '1st Armd Div. lost 70 out of its initial strength of 150 in the first fight and more than half the remainder on the way to Msus. It also lost during the retreat 30 field guns, 30 anti-tank guns and 25 light A.A. guns.'

with the enemy. No stronger possible proof could be adduced of the wisdom of Auchinleck's repeated pleas for time in which to train troops for desert warfare. Even so, need the catastrophe have been as complete as it was?

On the afternoon of January 23 Tucker proposed that the 4th Indian Division should strike south from Benghazi, but Godwin-Austen told him to wait until the armour situation was clearer, and that if Rommel captured Msus he must evacuate Benghazi and fall back to the Derna-Mechili line—as soon as he received the code signal 'Mercury'.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that January 24 was as wasted on the British side as—in von Mellenthin's view—it was wasted on the Axis side. It was not until the morning of January 25 that Tucker was told that he might move a brigade group south to the Beda Fomm area. Then suddenly this move was interrupted by the code signal 'Mercury'.

Here was a repetition of the blunder made early in 'Crusader', the refusal of infantry assistance to armour in trouble, based on the theory that the armour should fight it out alone.

When the code signal 'Mercury' had been issued, Eighth Army's Naval Liaison Officer telegraphed to the C.-in-C. Mediterranean:

Preparations to evacuate Benghazi are being made as a precautionary measure only. Demolition work is not being ordered yet. Non-fighting personnel in the circumstances are being moved eastwards as far as possible by night. . . . Should Benghazi fall Derna will follow.

A copy of this signal arrived at the Admiralty late on January 24. It subsequently reached the vigilant eyes of the Prime Minister.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*25 January 1942*

I am much disturbed by the signal from Naval Liaison Officer Eighth Army which speaks of evacuation of Benghazi and Derna.

I had certainly never been led to suppose that such a situation could arise. All this movement of non-fighting personnel eastwards, and statement that demolition work at Benghazi has not been ordered yet, places the campaign on a very different level from any we had considered.

Have you really had a heavy defeat in the Antelat area, has our fresh armour been unable to compete with the resuscitated German tanks? It seems to me this is a serious crisis and one to me quite unexpected.

Why should they all be off so quick? Why should not the 4th Indian Division hold out at Benghazi like the Huns at Halfaya?

The kind of retirement now evidently envisaged by subordinate officers implies the failure of 'Crusader' and the ruin of 'Acrobat'.

This telegram was despatched from London twenty-six minutes before midnight on the night of January 25-26 and was received in Cairo at 01.40 hours on the 26th. Churchill's anxiety was perfectly justified. It was shared and had indeed been anticipated by Auchinleck. At nine o'clock on the morning of January 25—after some delays on the airfield—Auchinleck, accompanied by Tedder and John Shearer, had flown up to Tmimi. He resumed his daily—or almost daily—letters to Arthur Smith.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

*26 January 1942*

The situation is not satisfactory to my mind, chiefly because of the apparent inability of the 1st Armoured Division to hold the enemy for any length of time. I do not say they are not fighting hard, because they are, from all accounts, but the fact remains that they were pushed out of Msus yesterday, though they had columns still east of that place engaged with the enemy yesterday evening. The latest reports are that 1st Armd Div. is south of Charruba, on which place it is presumably concentrating. Some of the Guards Bde columns are said to be missing, 'cut off' is one expression used, and it may be that some troops are short of petrol, which is, to my mind, the most serious possibility. However, we shall see, and I think the enemy must be pretty well stretched, though, true to form, he will push on to the utmost limit of his resources, even with the weakest forces, unless we can stabilize the situation.

Godwin-Austen had yesterday made up his mind that Benghazi could no longer be held, and that the 4th Indian Division must be withdrawn via Derna. All heavy installations have been evacuated from Benghazi, and the naval establishments should have got out last night. These are, I think, wise precautions, but I am very averse to abandoning the place unless it is absolutely necessary, as you know. I discussed the whole situation with Neil Ritchie yesterday evening, by which time 13th Corps H.Q. were on the move towards Mechili from Charruba and out of touch, and he has issued orders direct to Taker that the 4th Ind. Div. are to arrange to protect their own eastward flank as far as El Abiar, and to push as strongly as possible with small mobile columns with artillery against the enemy's western flank and communications

in the direction of Antelat, while 1st Armd Div. are to do all they can to prevent an enemy advance northwards towards Charruba and Mechili. The Polish Brigade Group are moving on Mechili, and should be concentrated there this afternoon—with luck. Some of them are there already. 150th Bde . . . are to reach Bir Hacheim today, and to move on as quickly as possible to Buerat-El Hales and Tengeder and secure the southern approaches. They are to operate offensively westwards with mobile columns.

Neil Ritchie spent a long time last night on the 'blower' talking to Godwin-Austen and telling of this change of plan. G.-A. is very much against any change and without any hesitation dissociated himself from it, as he considered that to change now would be most difficult, and that the new plan was impracticable. Neil took full responsibility and ordered him to put it into effect at once. The necessary orders are being issued. Neil has taken 4th Ind. Div. under his direct command, as he has better means of communication with it than 13th Corps, and is determined to stage this counter-offensive. So far, there has been no sign of any enemy activity towards Benghazi, and we know that all his maintenance transport is strung out along the Agedabia-Antelat track, and should be very sensitive to determined attack.

I realize that we are taking a big risk, but so is the enemy, and I think his risk is bigger than ours. We must recover the initiative as soon as we can, and it seems to me that this is the only immediately possible way of doing it. I only wish it had been possible to do it earlier. I gather that Tucker has been urging it for some time now, but I daresay Godwin-Austen had good reasons for not resorting to it. It is difficult to say without knowing what the local situation is. It is possible that nothing may come of it, but I refuse to believe that the enemy's supply situation, or indeed his tactical situation, is all that he could wish it to be. I am ready to bet that he must be very surprised by the extent of the success he has achieved.

I am staying up here today, and so is Tedder. Neil goes over to Mechili this afternoon by air to meet G.-A., who expects to arrive there by 4 p.m. Further action may be necessary in this direction, but I hope it will not be necessary to do anything drastic, though I am quite ready for it.

Neil intends to move this H.Q. to Sidi Rezeiz, which will be much better in my opinion from every point of view. I have never really liked Tmimi as an Eighth Army H.Q. It was intended originally to be a temporary halt only, and is, to my mind, too much to one flank of the general axis of operations. His

advanced parties are there already, and I think Neil will move as soon as communications are satisfactorily established, but his decision will of course be governed by the course of events.

Neil is laying plans for the future and the resumption of the offensive when the enemy has been held. . . .

*General Smith to General Auchinleck*

26 January 1942

. . . As I see it, the chap who sticks it longest and has the best guts is going to win this battle.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

27 January 1942

. . . The crux of the whole matter is the condition of the 1st Armd Div., which Godwin-Austen told Neil can no longer be counted on as a fighting force. Its losses are said to be forty guns and I suppose about a hundred or more tanks, and there is much doubt as to whether it was able to inflict any appreciable loss on the enemy. G.-A. is apparently very pessimistic about it, and says it cannot possibly be counted on to cover the flank of 4th Ind. Div. if the latter remains in Benghazi. However, Neil told G.-A. that he was to issue orders to it to do this, and to remain at Charruba and take the offensive against the enemy at once. These orders were issued yesterday afternoon.

Meanwhile, Tucker has been ordered to take the offensive with his division against the enemy western flank from Msus to Antelat. If, however, the 1st Armd Div. is not capable of protecting the southern flank of the L. of C. to Benghazi, we may have to come out, though this is the last thing I want to do. Neil has told G.-A. to give him an immediate report on the fighting condition of 1st Armd Div., but this has not arrived yet.

Meanwhile, the latest report is that 1st Armd Div. with the Guards Brigade is organizing a defence round Charruba with armoured car patrols on a wide arc, thirty-five to forty miles out, from west through south to east. There is apparently a detachment of Royals with some A/Tk guns on the Trigh el Abd watching that line. 4th Ind. Div. were active yesterday, and their fighting patrols were almost in Antelat and thence west to the coast about Ras Ben Hagen through Beda Fomm, and found no enemy. Antelat is said to be empty. 4th Ind. Div. hold Scleidima and Sidi Bramm on the escarpment to the north of it, or did yesterday afternoon. They are also in Solluch.

Neil is just off with 'Mary' Coningham to see Tucker at Benghazi. It was lovely early this morning, but this damned wind has started again, and the dust is getting up.



The Navy were most precipitate in starting their destructive work at Benghazi, and the man in charge anticipated his orders apparently. So far as I can make out no other demolitions were carried out, except for a few enemy stores, and the R.A.F. burnt some petrol unfortunately.

It is early to say yet what may happen, as so much depends on the state of 1st Arm'd Div. However, the situation seems better than it has been for some days, and to be coming to hand. The Poles and 150th Infantry Brigade are being told to be as aggressive as possible with mixed columns, and I hope Tucker will be able really to worry the enemy. He has the offensive spirit all right, and the right ideas. I have great hopes of being able to hold Benghazi and restore the situation, perhaps to the enemy's ultimate detriment. However, as I say, things are delicately balanced still.

As I think I told you, this H.Q. is in process of establishing itself at Sidi Rezeiz, but the transfer is being effected deliberately and carefully to give no impression of undue haste. There was a possibility of our moving back today but this has been postponed.

The R.A.F. yesterday gave the enemy hell all along the road Msus-Antelat. The fighters have got their blood up, and reports are still coming in of burning lorries and vehicles all over the place. More power to them!

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*27 January 1942*

... There is no doubt, I fear that our armoured forces failed to compete with enemy satisfactorily and that they have had heavy losses without prospect [of being] able to inflict comparable damage on enemy. Cause of this not yet clear, but probably that our troops, being dispersed widely, were unable to concentrate for concerted action against enemy compact mass. This is probably only one reason of several. 1st Armoured Division, or what remains of it, is now concentrated and covered by armoured car screen, and I hope it may be fit for offensive action at once, but I await report from its commander. Other aspect of the operations demands enquiry, which will be made. Meanwhile object is to regain initiative, close in on enemy, destroy him if we can, otherwise push him back. Am confident General Ritchie is fully determined to effect this object. Tedder and I staying here for the present.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*28 January 1942*

Many thanks. I have complete confidence in you and am glad you are staying up.

## JANUARY, THE FATEFUL MONTH

You have no doubt seen most secret stuff about Rommel's presumed intentions namely clearing up triangle Benghazi-Msus-Mechili and then withdrawing to waiting line about Agheila. This seems to reinforce importance of our holding on.

I am most anxious to hear further from you about defeat of our armour by inferior enemy numbers. This cuts very deep.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

28 January 1942

... Yesterday started quietly, and Neil and 'Mary' Coningham flew over to Benghazi to see 'Gertie' Tucker, with whom they had a satisfactory interview apparently. Neil says he is in cracking form and full of fight and, what is much more important, of original ideas for beating the enemy. This is most refreshing and again emphasizes, if emphasis were needed, the importance of not leaving commanders too long in the same place or the same job! I feel the wanderlust myself!!!

The enemy started moving again before lunch yesterday as you know, and true to form has taken the bold stroke of dividing his forces in diametrically opposite directions from a base which cannot hold any real reserve of supplies. At least, that is how it looks. Without being too optimistic, it seems as if he may have once again under-estimated our capacity to recover and hit back after a reverse—for we have had a reverse—there is no getting away from it. However, I feel that Neil has the situation very well in hand. In fact, it looks as if the enemy is doing the very thing Neil was hoping he would do, except that he did not anticipate his splitting his force as he has done. This, again, may give us an even better opportunity of hitting him. It looks as if the majority of the enemy armour is in his eastern thrust, though he has apparently got some tanks in the force moving on El Abiar.

Neil has just heard from Godwin-Austen that Messervy says that 1st Armd Div. is reorganized and ready for offensive action. It has been ordered by Godwin in anticipation of orders from Neil to strike south-eastwards against the enemy moving on Mechili. Tucker and the 4th Ind. Div. are to hold El Abiar and strike east and south against the flank and rear of the enemy moving on El Abiar, which would seem to offer good chance of success, though a report just in indicating movement of small columns of enemy tanks and M.T. northwards from Agedabia west of the escarpment may hamper this move. There is no doubt that today may be critical, and much will depend on the skill and boldness with which the 1st Armd Div. is handled, and the ability of 4th Ind. Div. to hold off the threat from the south while striking

east. Both sides are taking big risks, and I hope we can play that game as well as Rommel. He is running absolutely true to form, and putting everything in the shop window. So are we I hope. The difference is, I think, that our supply situation ought to be better than his, and our air is, for the moment having everything its own way. . . .

I should not be at all surprised to learn that the apparent failure of 1st Arm'd Div. to deal with the enemy in the present operations was due largely to the divorcement of the armour from the infantry. . . .

I shall stay on here for a bit, I think, and I fancy A.O.C.-in-C. will stay too. The R.A.F. have been grand—morale sky high and full of hate.

It must be realized that during this visit to Eighth Army Auchinleck scrupulously refrained from any attempt to take the control of operations out of Ritchie's hands. In his own opinion he was there solely to advise, help and see for himself. He retained his day-to-day responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief, dealt daily with a mass of paper and telegrams, and in his letters to Arthur Smith gave his decisions on a multiplicity of matters unconnected with the conduct of the battle.

This was continuing to go badly. On January 27 Rommel advanced again, feinting towards Mechili while making his main effort against 4th Indian Division round Benghazi. His feint drew off what remained of British armour; 4th Indian Division, one brigade of which looked like being cut off in Benghazi itself but with great daring broke through to the south and rejoined the main body, withdrew through the hills in the centre of Cyrenaica, fighting a stubborn series of rearguard actions.

In the course of these operations Godwin-Austen asked to be relieved of his command of 13th Corps, feeling that Ritchie had displayed a lack of confidence in him by issuing orders directly to his subordinate commanders—particularly to Tucker of the 4th Indian Division. The Commander-in-Chief had no option but to accept his request.<sup>1</sup> He was replaced by Gott.

Once Benghazi had been lost—Axis forces re-entered it on January 29—Derna could not be held, and the whole of western Cyrenaica was again in Rommel's hands. 13th Corps withdrew to a line running south from Gazala. Here Eighth Army reformed at the beginning of

<sup>1</sup> Gen. Godwin-Austen served under Auchinleck again—with distinction—as Q.M.G. and then Principal Administrative Officer, G.H.Q. (India), 1945-6.

February and constructed strong defensive positions. The winter campaign on Auchinleck's Western Front was at an end, and he himself returned to G.H.Q. on February 1.

He had been at Eighth Army H.Q. for a week. His intervention in January was neither so absolute as it had been in November nor so effective. Even before he returned to Cairo he pondered deeply and seriously the causes and the consequences of this reverse.

*General Auchinleck to General Smith*

*30 January 1942*

... I have not yet had figures of our total tank losses, but they must be large, and all I fear have been abandoned to the enemy, who will certainly put some into running order, thus augmenting his own strength.

We have got to face the fact that, unless we can achieve superiority on the battlefield by better co-operation between the arms, and more original leadership of our armoured forces than is apparently being exercised at present, we may have to forgo any idea of mounting a strategical offensive, because our armoured forces are tactically incapable of meeting the enemy in the open, even when superior to him in number. Another very serious aspect which is obtruding itself more and more is the growth of an inferiority complex amongst our armoured forces, owing to their failure to compete with the enemy tanks which they consider (and rightly so) superior to their own in certain aspects. This is very dangerous, and will be most difficult to eradicate once it takes root, as I am afraid it is doing now. It becomes, therefore, all the more important to weld the three arms together as closely as possible.

As you will see from the draft telegram enclosed with this letter, I have put this matter very plainly to the Prime Minister, as the military authorities at home, including Martel, must realize what they are up against, and that it is no good just counting tanks or regiments and pretending that ours are individually as good as the Germans', because they are not. Before we can really do anything against the Germans on land, they have got to be made as good and better both in equipment, organization and training.

As you know, I am not inclined to pessimism, but I view our present situation with some misgiving, so far as our power to take the offensive on a large scale is concerned. However, we must go all out now to get things right. If you like, get Gott in and Lumsden too, and thrash the matter out with them as frankly and as brutally as you like. No time now for politeness! ...

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

30 January 1942

Thank you for your telegram of January 28 received yesterday afternoon. Very sorry we had to let Benghazi go but hope loss is temporary only.

Regarding action 1st Armd Div. Am not certain that enemy tanks were appreciably less in number than ours actually in running order on any one day, though it is likely our strength in tanks in the battle area was superior to theirs. I have given you in my telegram of January 27 some reasons for defeat of our armoured force, and I think these still hold good. Other and at present irremediable causes which I have already mentioned in a letter to you are short range and inferior performance our two-pounder guns compared with German guns, and mechanical unreliability our cruiser tanks compared with German tanks. In addition I am not satisfied that tactical leadership our armoured units is of sufficiently high standard to offset German material advantages. This is in hand but cannot be improved in a day unfortunately.

I am reluctantly compelled to conclusion that to meet German armoured forces with any reasonable hope of decisive success, our armoured forces as at present equipped, organized and led must have at least two to one superiority. Even then they must rely for success on working in the very closest co-operation with infantry and artillery which except perhaps for their weakness in anti-tank guns are fully competent to take on their German opposite numbers. These principles are being worked to here as closely as circumstances will permit, but I am afraid there are signs that personnel of Royal Armoured Corps are in some instances losing confidence in their equipment. Everything possible will be done to rectify this.

General Ritchie and I are fully alive to Rommel's probable intentions but whatever these may be he will certainly try to exploit success by use of even smallest columns until he meets resistance. Plans are in train to counter such action. . . .

\* \* \*

The causes of this sharp defeat, which was to lead to others, was the subject of much debate at the time and for many years afterwards. They were many and complex; no single major cause can be isolated from any other. It cannot be argued simply that 'a fine division' (1st Armoured) was 'squandered through mismanagement'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 31.

All the factors deserve consideration. On the Axis side they were: the reinforcement of the Luftwaffe and the immobilization of the Royal Navy, with the consequent possibilities of replenishment; Rommel's capacity to exploit an opponent's revealed weakness to the maximum, and the high morale and high standard of training and experience of the Afrika Korps. On the British side they were: the pressing desire to push on with 'Acrobat' as quickly as possible; over-confidence; the lack of early and precise information; tardiness in reacting to such information as was garnered; equipment—especially in armour and anti-tank guns—still inferior to the Germans'; faulty tactical leadership, and imperfect comprehension of the basic principles of co-operation between armour, artillery and infantry; and in 1st Armoured Division—apart from the effects of the sudden, though necessary, change of commander a few days before the division went into action—lack of understanding (because of lack of training and experience) of what it meant to stand and fight Rommel's panzers.

The consequences were grave but not catastrophic. Auchinleck bore the brunt of the blame.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### 'Very Ill-Content'

WHEN Auchinleck returned to Cairo at the beginning of February 1942, the over-all strategic picture was as sombre as at any time in close on two and a half years of total war. On January 29—the day that Benghazi fell—Churchill, aware of a mounting tide of Press and political criticism of the general conduct of the war, asked for a vote of confidence in the House of Commons.

In the course of a speech imbued with all his characteristic tenacity and courage,<sup>1</sup> the Prime Minister gave the House a generous but not wholly accurate account of the Desert fighting of the past two months, and paid a tribute to Auchinleck's 'robust decision' to maintain the impetus of 'Crusader'.

On the broad issue he said:

There are so many fronts which are open, so many vulnerable points to defend, so many inevitable misfortunes, so many shrill voices raised to take advantage, now that we can breathe more freely, of all the turns and twists of war. Therefore I feel entitled to come to the House of Commons, whose servant I am, and ask them not to press me to act against my conscience and better judgment and make scapegoats in order to improve my own position, not to press me to do the things which may be clamoured for at the moment, but which will not help in our war effort, but, on the contrary, to give me their encouragement and to give me their aid.

He was accorded his vote of confidence by 464 votes to one.

\* \* \*

The German High Command, whose interest in and support for Rommel's activities in North Africa had been hitherto on the whole perfunctory, became aware of their possible importance. His was no

<sup>1</sup> Printed at length in Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, pp. 57–62.

longer a distant, small-scale sideshow, but worth the attention of Göring, who visited Rome at the end of January, and at a lunch at General Cavallero's house<sup>1</sup> caused great offence by shouting ‘Tobruk!’ at intervals throughout the meal.

By February 6 Eighth Army were dug in along the Gazala–Bir Hacheim line, and the impetus of Rommel's attack had petered out. His communications were badly stretched again, and he was short of fuel. Still, the Herr General was—not unnaturally—in buoyant form.

*General Rommel to Frau Rommel*

*4 February 1942*

On the move since the 2nd. But we have got Cyrenaica back. It went like greased lightning. I hope to be home in ten days and to get quite a bit of leave. . . .<sup>2</sup>

No such agreeable prospect awaited Auchinleck. He had to brace himself, his subordinates and the forces they commanded to the stern tasks of reorganizing, training, planning and preparing for the next round. The fundamental question, to which in the fluid conditions of war there could be no finally satisfactory answer, was: How soon? The only possible area for that offensive action which the Prime Minister so consistently and so continually desired was the Western Desert. Any battle that might be fought on Auchinleck's Northern Front, by Ninth and Tenth Armies, was bound to be defensive. On the Western Front Eighth Army could not, in its present shape, be launched prematurely into an offensive which would, almost without doubt, prove to be another and costlier ‘Battleaxe’. In addition, the local, tactical problem of a Western Desert offensive could only be properly considered against the whole strategic background. Throughout February this took on darker and darker hues. It was inevitable—and right—that Auchinleck should strive, in February just as in January, to persevere towards a strategic solution with which his tactical approach to the question of the Western Desert would be in harmony.

In February, however, he was no longer as cut off from support, sympathy and guidance as he had been in January; and some stress should be laid on the fact that, despite his reversal of fortune, he continued to command the confidence of those to whom he was responsible. There was disappointment indeed, and later in the

<sup>1</sup> Cavallero, it will be recalled, had done his best to make Rommel stop his attack on January 23.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 183.



month an increasing degree both of misunderstanding and of friction; but there was not a hint at this time that anybody thought that he ought to be, or that he would be, relieved of his Command.

An unbuttoned, chance observation by Brooke has received some prominence.<sup>1</sup> It is easier to understand when set alongside the following letter:

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*6 February 1942*

... First and foremost I should like to offer my deep sympathy at the setback that your forces have suffered. I can so well imagine what a deep disappointment this must be to you, and am so very sorry for you.

Looking at Rommel's counter-stroke from the more detached point of view, I cannot help feeling that Shearer's over-optimistic intelligence played a large part in accounting for your troubles. You may remember that we doubted his figures here and queried them, and also that in a previous letter I had referred to the danger of his over-optimistic reports, which were consistently being proved as under-estimates of the enemy's power of recuperation, resistance, or evasion. I am afraid that it is in his nature always to under-estimate his opponent's strength, a dangerous failing. He suffered, from all accounts, from the same failing when working for Wavell. It is not my own impression but one that I have gathered from all quarters and I do hope you will consider seriously the danger of retaining him as your D.M.I. . . .

Turning to Syria, Iraq and Persia, I fully realize the result of the withdrawal of Australian Divisions and of intercepting 18th British Division and 17th and 14th Indian Divisions. It was inevitable to meet Far East threats. Luckily, Russian situation has decreased danger. Recent J.I.C.<sup>2</sup> survey points to the fact that German thrust through Caucasus or Turkey could not materialize much before middle or end of July. But even by that time we shall be lucky if we succeed in getting more than two divisions out to you, plus all reinforcements, A.A. guns, Air, etc.

Shipping is the complete bottle-neck. W.S. convoys won't take

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 196: 'On January 27 Brooke remarked to me: "If we had judged Rommel's condition by Auchinleck's reports and nothing else, we would regard him now as a prize-fighter in the last stages of exhaustion, lying back, practically unconscious, in his corner of the ring, with his seconds fanning him. It is quite funny in a way, to see him rise up and deliver such a crack on Auchinleck's war."'

<sup>2</sup> Joint Intelligence Committee.

more than one division per month at the maximum, and the March convoy, at your request, takes reinforcements, etc. so that first division can only start by April convoy (arriving June), and the next May (arriving July)!

We are examining every possible way of improving on this, but prospects are poor. I am still counting on getting some divisions out of India to the Middle East, provided Burma and Far East don't deteriorate further. . . .

The C.I.G.S. was, as he said, not alone in his criticism of the D.M.I. This was rapidly to increase in volume in the next few weeks; and, as will be seen, he was assailed as much on grounds of temperament and personality as on sheerly professional grounds. He had built up a large, diverse and, on the whole, extremely efficient Intelligence organization out of nothing; and he had served both Wavell and Auchinleck loyally and skilfully. Auchinleck's reaction to the mounting pressure for the removal of a key staff officer will also be considered later.

In the meantime, in the 'fast bag' which had brought Brooke's letter there was another of almost equal importance, written a few days earlier.

*General Ismay to General Auchinleck*

*1 February 1942*

. . . You may imagine with what intense interest the ebb and flow of your battle has been watched in this country. For the moment the tide has swung round in the other man's favour, but I am confident that you will get your own back before long. The P.M. gets terribly worried at times, and—as you can tell from his telegrams—terribly impatient: but of his complete confidence in you, there is no shadow of doubt. You have done magnificently, old friend, and I am very proud of you. . . .

What terrible humiliations and grievous loss flow from losing command of the sea. Not having had this grim experience for over 150 (P) years, we have forgotten its torments.

The Chiefs of Staff are working very hard, and in good harmony. Alan Brooke is a great source of strength—very quick and very decisive—a trifle impatient perhaps, and unable to suffer fools gladly: but these are not bad qualities—especially in time of war. . . .

1942 has started rather gloomily, but taking the long view, I should say that our prospects are immeasurably brighter than they were a year ago. America would never have really got down to it, if she had not been assailed herself; and, though she may take a

long long time to get going, she's a difficult animal to pull off a fight. . . .

One of the most unsatisfactory features of this war from a personal point of view is the number of one's most cherished beliefs that have proved wrong. I always felt sure, for example, that Hong Kong could not be taken by assault. Again I thought that modern battleships might be hurt, but were most unlikely to be sunk by aircraft. Wrong again!<sup>1</sup>

On February 12, the day after he had received these two letters, Auchinleck had this signal:

*Following personal from Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

Have been thinking much about you and your affairs with complete confidence you will come out on top.

Singapore fell to the Japanese on February 15.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

16 February 1942

We all realize situation consequent on fall of Singapore and you may rely on us to hang on and do our bit to help you through to victory.

This atmosphere of friendly understanding, however, was soon to be dispelled.

\* \* \*

On February 4 Auchinleck laid before the Middle East Defence Committee a paper which analysed in scrupulous detail the current situation on his Western Front, and a week later he embodied his conclusions in an operational instruction to Ritchie.<sup>2</sup> In the latter he defined Ritchie's tasks as:

(a) To hold the enemy as far west of Tobruk as possible without risking defeat in detail.

(b) To organize a striking force with which to resume the offensive, with the object of destroying the enemy forces in the field, and occupying Cyrenaica at the earliest possible date.

(c) To study the possibility of regaining the landing grounds in the area Derna-Martuba-Mechili for our air forces at an early

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck pencilled a friendly but mordant comment alongside Ismay's remark about Hong Kong: 'I didn't!'

<sup>2</sup> Despatch, Appendixes 8 and 9, pp. 70-3.

date, provided this can be done without prejudice to the tasks defined in (a) and (b).

(d) To prevent to the utmost extent possible, without prejudice to the tasks defined above in (a) and (b), the use by the enemy air force of the landing grounds in the area Derna-Martuba-Mechili.

(e) To avoid your forces being invested in Tobruk in the event of our having to withdraw to the east of that place.

(f) To complete the preparation of defensive positions on the general line Sollum-Maddalena-Jarabub at the earliest possible date.

On the same day Auchinleck wrote Ritchie a letter—five pages of closely typed foolscap—setting out his views on the possibilities facing Eighth Army:

... You have, I know, thought out all the possibilities. In fact, I imagine you think of little else! It is, therefore, perhaps wasting your time to ask you to read my ideas on the subject. We, too, are thinking hard, and, being in less intimate association with the battle, may perhaps sometimes get a different angle on things. This is my excuse for inflicting these thoughts on you.

The enemy has been saying loudly and often in the last few days that he has got us on the run and implying that he is about to stage a major offensive. This may be bluff, or he may really think that we were so heavily defeated in western Cyrenaica as to make us incapable of offering any real resistance to a further enemy offensive. I don't know which is right, but John Shearer inclines strongly to the second alternative. . . .

His analysis was detailed, his advice was copious and careful. He concluded:

If we are to take advantage of the enemy's apparent under-estimation of our strength, and his possible consequent decision to attack us with inadequate forces, we must achieve surprise.

Surprise can only be achieved first by hiding from him our strength in tanks, and secondly by stationing them where they can be used to best effect, which implies keeping them concentrated.

To give of their best, our tanks must have the maximum support of our artillery and infantry firmly established in positions from which the enemy cannot shift them without risking heavy casualties, which he cannot afford if our information is correct.

We cannot be led away by feints and movements designed to

## AUCHINLECK

mislead us, at which the enemy is very good. If we are to avoid this, we must have continuous and intensive ground and air reconnaissance of the most offensive kind. Above all we must try and keep track of his main tank concentrations.

P.S. I signed the operation instruction this morning and sent it up to you. Hope it is all right. I am afraid you may be disappointed at the availability dates of reinforcements but I think these are on the safe side, at least I hope so. If you want the regiments of 4th Armoured Brigade sent up independently before the whole brigade is ready, let me know at once and I'll do what I can. We will do all we can to hasten everyone. Meanwhile, don't send back *any* troops if you think you need them.

The effect of the Far Eastern disasters on Auchinleck's plans and dispositions was swiftly recognized by the C.I.G.S., particularly when he found himself compelled to order a new large-scale diversion of troops to the menaced areas.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*17 February 1942*

My telegram of February 17 contains warning order to send 70th Div. to Ceylon and Burma early and 9th Australian Div. to a destination not yet firm as soon as shipping is available.

For your own information the question of returning to India one of the divisions in Tenth Army is also under consideration. You will not be surprised to learn of these decisions which are forced on us by the threat now developing against India and Ceylon and thus to our whole position in the East and Middle East.

From your point of view the loss of three or four divisions and the practical certainty that you will not now receive more than a division from U.K. during the next six months will obviously make your task much more difficult.

I realize that your plans for regaining Cyrenaica may have to be abandoned in favour of a defence of the Egyptian frontier and that you will be on little more than an internal security basis on your Northern Front. The weakening of Middle East does not mean that we are now discounting the potential threat to both your Western and Northern Fronts during 1942. It is a question of reinforcing where we are most immediately threatened.

I am particularly sorry that in spite of your very great transport difficulties you are being asked to find a full scale for 70th Div. subject to any reduction which India may consider permissible. There is no other way of ensuring that 70th Div. will be fit to take the field immediately on arrival.

We will endeavour to spare you the necessity of finding transport for 9th Australian Div. but I can promise nothing at present.

This, two days after the fall of Singapore, was realistic and helpful; and it supplied for Auchinleck and the whole of the Middle East Defence Committee a sound basis on which to found their strategy and their tactics.

However, three days later the Governor of Malta, in a signal to the Chiefs of Staff, pointed out that the supply situation of the island was already extremely grave and had been made graver by the failure of the last convoy to arrive, and suggested that the situation in Cyrenaica was the main threat to the Malta-bound convoys. This was perfectly true, but it was not the whole truth. Malta's situation was certainly made more difficult by Ritchie's recent reverse in western Cyrenaica; but two of the causes of Ritchie's reverse were the increasing scale of Luftwaffe attacks on Malta and the urgent need, under the threat of the invasion of the island, to reinforce its garrison. The two battlefields were interlinked. But from the time of this telegram onwards a certain confusion of intention developed in London; and the belief strengthened that it was more necessary to hasten a Western Desert offensive in order to relieve the pressure on Malta, than to help Malta in order to make a Western Desert offensive possible. This confusion came to dominate opinion about the Middle East in London, to derange planning and to exacerbate relations between Churchill and Auchinleck. It was on all these grounds regrettable.

Like Wavell a year before, Auchinleck was now expected—before the end of this round was reached he would be ordered—to do far too much with far too little. Sir Winston Churchill has set out in implacable detail his indictment of Auchinleck in this phase of his Command.<sup>1</sup> It must be considered in similar detail, but there is a general proposition which is sharply relevant. The Prime Minister, according to his own published account of his exchanges with Auchinleck, was unable to perceive that the Commander-in-Chief had had allotted to him specific and onerous responsibilities in respect of the Northern Front, and the C.I.G.S., who was perfectly aware of those responsibilities, could not persuade him even to think about them.

Yet they could never for an instant be forgotten by Auchinleck. On February 20 the Middle East Defence Committee considered the problems of the Command as a whole. They embodied their

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, Ch. XVII. There is not one reference, however trivial, to the existence of the Northern Front.

conclusions in a telegram to London in which they pointed out that if an enemy attack were to be resisted on a huge arc, extending from northern Persia through northern Iraq, Aleppo and Cyprus round to the Libyan frontier, the manpower requirements would be seventeen infantry divisions and five brigade groups; if a more passive defence in rearward areas were decided upon, then twelve infantry divisions would be the minimum required. 'When we say minimum we mean minimum.' They went on to say that when the formations were withdrawn from the theatre, as the C.I.G.S. had demanded in his telegram of February 17, there would be in all eight infantry divisions and five brigade groups. They concluded, therefore, that, although it was hoped to be able for some months to hold the present positions in Libya and possibly even to gain some ground in Cyrenaica, it would be impossible to do more than cause some delay to an enemy advance through Iraq and Syria on the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal. They said that in their belief the need for reinforcements in their theatre of war was so pressing that the greatest sacrifices would be justified. They asked for the immediate despatch of at least four infantry divisions, and that this should be done without prejudice to the arrangements already made for the despatch of R.A.F. reinforcements.

On February 23 Auchinleck issued an operational instruction to General Wilson, Ninth Army, and General Quinan, Tenth Army.<sup>1</sup> Each was told that he could assume that the force at his disposal would consist of one armoured division and two infantry divisions. Cyprus would be defended by one armoured regiment and one infantry division. The instruction also mentioned the G.H.Q. Reserve, which the Commander-in-Chief intended to build up, under the command of General Ritchie, to be allotted as might be necessary to either Eighth, Ninth or Tenth Army, and consisting of a possible maximum of three armoured brigade groups, one army tank brigade or two battalions, and two or three infantry brigade groups.

The historian of the Indian Army's effort in World War II, Sir Compton Mackenzie, said of Auchinleck's policy at this time:

No evidence exists on the printed page that anybody at home committed himself to a positive opinion that the Germans would not attempt to strike on the Northern Front of Middle East and the historian is justified in presuming that the risk taken was a gamble which succeeded. Let it be remembered that a similar gamble over the Japanese invasion did not come off, and with

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, Appendix 10.

that in mind the continuous apprehension in Cairo about that Northern Front should be applauded; in the circumstances of that anxious time any complacency in Cairo would have been reckless.<sup>1</sup>

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

26 February 1942

I have not troubled you much in these difficult days, but I must now ask what are your intentions. According to our figures you have substantial superiority in the air, in armour, and in other forces over the enemy. There seems to be danger that he may gain reinforcements as fast as or even faster than you. The supply of Malta is causing us increased anxiety, and anyone can see the magnitude of our disasters in the Far East.

Pray let me hear from you. All good wishes.

On February 27 Auchinleck sent a seven-page signal to the Prime Minister. It was a meticulously detailed appreciation of the whole situation as he saw it. He calculated that Eighth Army would not possess a reasonable numerical superiority in armour before June 1, and affirmed that to launch a major offensive before then would be to risk defeat in detail and possibly to endanger the safety of Egypt. He summed up his intentions for his Western Front thus:

One. To continue to build up armoured striking force in Eighth Army forward area as rapidly as possible.

Two. Meanwhile to make Gazala-Tobruk and Sollum-Maddalena positions strong as possible and push railway forward towards El Adem.

Three. To build up forward area reserves of supplies for renewal of offensive.

Four. To seize first chance of staging limited offensive to regain landing grounds in area Derna-Mechili provided this can be done without prejudicing chances of launching major offensive to recapture Cyrenaica or safety of Tobruk base area.

Churchill was deeply angered by this telegram. It aroused all his mistrust of and hostility towards Auchinleck, emotions which were henceforth not of the moment, but permanent and deepening. It took some time for all the information which it contained to be digested by his own staff and by the War Office staff, and for the arguments to be marshalled to counter Auchinleck's. In his view

<sup>1</sup> *Eastern Epic*, p. 536.



this was the July to November 'lull' all over again, and he was determined not to permit it. Relations immediately became very strained. This week-end, between Saturday, February 28 and Monday, March 2, was crucial in the history of the Middle East Command, and in Auchinleck's career. The exchange of letters and telegrams, and the published evidence of participants in the dispute, merit close study.

Auchinleck's long appreciation crossed one from the Chiefs of Staff sent on the same day (February 27) telling him that whatever the risk involved for the rest of his Command, an offensive must be launched to recapture the air bases of Cyrenaica by the next period of the moon in order to get a substantial convoy through to Malta. It is clear that the C.I.G.S. shared the Prime Minister's view as to the overriding importance of Malta. It is also clear that he believed that Auchinleck was now being over-cautious.

Auchinleck did not answer this telegram until March 4. That he had no idea of the strength of the criticism which was building up against him in London—not only in the Prime Minister's mind but in the minds of his closest advisers<sup>1</sup>—is clear from two letters which he wrote during this fateful weekend.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*1 March 1942*

Very many thanks for your letter of February 9 which arrived today. . . .

It was not with a pessimistic view that I told my people to be ready on the Northern Front by the end of March, as I realized that the date of possible enemy attack was even then receding rapidly, but in order to get the work done, so that the troops could get some mobile warfare training, which they sadly lack, I am afraid. The date has now been put forward, chiefly because of the inevitable delay resulting from the withdrawal of troops and consequent reliefs. We understand that August 1 is now more likely to be the dangerous period, but this, I think, may be on the optimistic side! Thank you very much indeed for saying you will do your best for us, and knowing you I never doubted this! Your being where you are gives me great strength!

You will not, I know, think we are squealing when we point out exactly how we think reductions and withdrawals will affect our position here. You must know this, I feel sure.

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, p. 262: 'We found ourselves all together.' This is quite true. Cf. *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 205, and *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 338.

Lyttelton's going is a great loss. I hope we get someone as good in exchange.<sup>1</sup>

We are adjusting our mode of living to our reduced circumstances! I hope with some success, though the margin is pretty narrow.

Alexander passed through yesterday. He has not an easy job, I fear.<sup>2</sup>

The other letter was to the newly-appointed Secretary of State for War, Sir James Grigg.<sup>3</sup> Grigg, one of the ablest of his generation of senior Civil Servants, was an old friend of Auchinleck's, having been Finance Member of the Government of India from 1934 to 1939; thereafter he was for three years Permanent Under-Secretary of State for War until Churchill advanced him to this Ministerial post.

Auchinleck wrote to him on March 2:

Everyone here got a good jerk when your appointment as Secretary of State was announced. A real good jerk is an excellent tonic, and I think this was the general effect produced in this burg. Much interest and much speculation on all sides, as you can well imagine, knowing as you do what your reputation is!! For myself, I am very glad, and only hope that you will be able to do all that I feel you want to do.

I hope I may write to you now and then, but not to bother you with small things.

There are, however, three things I would like to bring to your notice before you get too caught up in the whirlpool.

First is this matter of I.A. officers coming into appointments in so-called 'British' formations and dropping pay by so doing, or if they do not drop pay, failing to benefit financially by being advanced professionally. I know that this should not weigh with individuals, whose sole thought should be to win the war, even if their families starve, but human nature being what it is, it does weigh with them, and therefore must affect their efficiency.

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Oliver Lyttelton returned to the United Kingdom to become Minister of Production and a member of the War Cabinet. He was, in due course, replaced by Mr. Richard Casey, who had been for two years Australian Minister in Washington. Meanwhile, Sir Walter (later Lord) Monckton, Lyttelton's Deputy, acted as Minister of State with great efficiency for many weeks.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. Alexander was on his way to take command in Burma.

<sup>3</sup> Appointed in Churchill's Cabinet reshuffle on February 19.

In the Middle East today I have about 190,000 Indians as against 270,000 British from the U.K., so that, in any event, I must dilute all my staffs from G.H.Q. downwards with Indian Army staff officers, and this is now going on. It is essential to do this. This means that these officers may have a substantial grievance, or think they have, and efficiency without a reasonable degree of contentment is hard to attain. We have, I feel, enough external threats to contend with without adding to them internal discord. One of my main tasks here, if not *the* main one, is to study the psychology of this very mixed array we call an Army, and I spend most of my time doing this in the hope that it will not disintegrate altogether!

Secondly, there is the matter of giving adequate rank to officers bearing certain responsibilities. I fully realize the objections to inflated staffs and hordes of generals, but you cannot get away from the fact that in any army rank does count, and will always count, however much people may say that it is only the man who should count, and that the rank does not matter. It does matter, and I feel that if a C.-in-C. says that he honestly thinks a major-general is needed instead of a brigadier, his wishes should be met. I assure you that I do not ask for such things unless I have convinced myself they are needed. A case in point is a major-general General Staff on the staff of an 'Army', instead of a brigadier as at present. I am sure this is needed, and that failure to provide it is dangerous and likely to lead to inefficiency and disaster. I won't go into all the reasons, but they are most cogent.

Thirdly, I feel that your Military Secretary either fails to realize the meaning of psychology, or that if he does, he lacks the courage of his convictions. He refuses to allow me to publish in the local press lists of immediate awards until the King has approved them for publication at home. I am allowed to announce them to the individuals concerned, and put them in orders, but this is not nearly enough. The whole value of these awards is psychological, and this depends entirely on immediate and widespread publication. I am sure you realize this, and I feel that His Majesty would realize it too if it were put to him properly.

It may not be in accordance with 'usual practice', but this is an 'unusual' war, and it will have an 'unusual' end if we do not get a move on and sweep aside cobwebs and precedents and 'usual practices'. I feel that if anyone can do the sweeping, you will.

Finally, I feel that we must move with the times, and move ahead of the Boche. It is folly to think that we can end this war

and the Boche with an army organized as it was in 1939. We have moved far from the days of rigid organizations which are supposed to be suitable for every part of the world. We must get flexibility and the power to improvise quickly and without disorganization right down to the smallest formations. The German does it every day.

I feel this is supremely important, and I am trying to do it here, but I feel I am a voice crying in the wilderness, though the great majority here are with me.

On the evening of March 2 Brooke noted in his diary:

Another bad Monday . . . found P.M. had drafted a bad wire for Auchinleck in which he poured abuse on him for not attacking sooner. Without it being possible for him to be familiar with all aspects of the situation . . . he is trying to force him to attack at an earlier date than is thought advisable and, what is more, tried to obtain his ends by an offensive wire. Thank heaven we were able to stop the wire and reword it.<sup>1</sup>

General Kennedy has recorded that 'we'—Brooke and himself—agreed with the tenor of the Prime Minister's draft, but rephrased it more courteously. They omitted such remarks as that 'armies were not intended to stand about doing nothing' and that 'soldiers were meant to fight'. This rewording was well-intentioned, but from Auchinleck's viewpoint it would have been more helpful had they let the telegram go in the form in which Churchill desired. The Commander-in-Chief would have then been in no doubt as to what was in the Prime Minister's mind and could have taken such action as he thought fit. Even so, the telegram which they sent on the following day was still so worded as to cause considerable offence.

They told Auchinleck that his appreciation 'gave a picture heavily biased in favour of the enemy'. They disputed his estimate of relative tank strengths, and the telegram concluded:

We consider that an attempt to drive the Germans out of Cyrenaica in the next few weeks is not only imperative for the safety of Malta on which so much depends, but holds out the only hope of fighting a battle while the enemy is still comparatively weak and short of resources of all kinds.

Apart altogether from the immediate future situation in Africa,

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 338.

Malta and the Mediterranean we have to think of what may happen in the summer. We do not see what hope there will be at that time for the Levant-Caspian front, already denuded by the unavoidable calls of the Far East, if we have meanwhile allowed the enemy to build up in Africa a force which will summon all our remaining strength to the defence of Egypt's western flank.

Viewing the war situation as a whole, we cannot afford to stand idle at a time when the Russians are straining every nerve to give the enemy no rest and when it is so important to increase by every possible means the drain on the German armed forces.

If our view of the situation is correct, you must either grasp the opportunity which is held out in the immediate future, or else we must face the loss of Malta and a precarious defensive.

Please reconsider the matter urgently and telegraph your views.<sup>1</sup>

This telegram was based, as Kennedy has said, on the belief that Auchinleck's outlook had become defensive. This was a totally erroneous impression. When Auchinleck received it he apprehended the gravity of the misunderstanding, but he did not permit himself to be shaken.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*4 March 1942*

1. Draft reply from C.s-in-C. to Chiefs of Staff signal of February 27 covering whole subject already prepared and will be finally approved today at C.s-in-C.'s conference. Conclusions reached unlikely to differ greatly from those in my telegram of February 27 to Prime Minister. This for your private information.

2. I find it hard to believe in view of your telegram of February 17 that C.O.S. 241 had your approval as it seems to fail so signally either to appreciate facts as presented from here or to realize that we are fully aware of the situation as regards Malta in particular or the Middle East in general. We here are trying to face realities and to present to you the situation as it appears to us, not as we or you would like it to be. Para. 2 of your signal of February 27 is particularly uncalled for and implies that I and my officers are incompetent. For your information facts are as follows:

3. Tanks received in January: Grants forty-eight, Stuarts seventy-six, Matildas nil, Crusaders two, Valentines nil, total 126. Of these, issued to units and schools: Grants forty-three, Stuarts seventy-five, Crusaders two, Valentines nil, Matildas nil,

<sup>1</sup> There is no copy of this telegram—C.O.S. 241—in the Auchinleck papers. An incomplete version is reproduced in *Eastern Epic* by Compton Mackenzie, p. 537. This is the text used.

total 120. Not issued: Grants five, Stuarts one. Reasons, undergoing preparation for issue. Facts reference tanks now in this Command: Repairable in Eighth Army area and awaiting transfer to base workshops 220. Awaiting repair at base thirty-five. Under repair 273. Total repairable or under repair 528. Total tanks received from U.K. or U.S.A. under preparation for issue 148. Total with units 591. Serviceable in reserve with R.A.O.C. forty-eight. Grand total 1,315.

4. You know that many other factors besides the mere issue of tanks to units govern the readiness of formations for battle and I will be grateful if you will explain this to the Chiefs of Staff and the Defence Minister. This applies particularly when new types of tanks are received such as General Grants with more powerful weapons necessitating change in tactical procedure. We must have time to think how to get full value out of our material.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*6 March 1942*

Your appreciation had met with considerable disapproval on part of Defence Minister and resulted in a draft of a telegram which he wished sent to you.

The Chiefs of Staff succeeded in getting his approval to the despatch of C.O.S. 241 in substitution for his. I am quite sure that your feelings would have been much more hurt had the Defence Minister's telegram been despatched instead of ours. You may be sure that I have always made a special point of representing the factors mentioned in first sentence of your para. 4.

The situation had changed considerably since my telegram of February 17 was sent. At that time the full gravity of the situation in Malta was not apparent, also decision not to withdraw further forces from the Middle East and to leave the Indian Division which it was previously intended to withdraw had not then been taken.

The greatest difficulty I had here was in reconciling your figures of tank strengths. In your statement dated February 23 you showed 660 serviceable tanks, yet in your appreciation [of February 27] you have allowed only for 430 tanks on April 1, which seemed to represent the strength of but two brigades and two army tank battalions in the forward area.<sup>1</sup>

The argument now took a new turn.

<sup>1</sup> Tank strengths were never agreed. Sir Compton Mackenzie made a sapient comment (*Eastern Epic*, p. 539): 'The trouble was that the War Office would presume that every tank sent out to the Middle East was hale and hearty.'

## AUCHINLECK

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

7 March 1942

The situation disclosed by your appreciations . . . is very serious and not likely to be adjusted by correspondence.

I should be glad, therefore, if you would come home for consultation at your earliest convenience, bringing with you any officers you may require, especially an authority on state of tanks and their servicing.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

8 March 1942<sup>1</sup>

Beg you to use your influence against this idea which can in no circumstances do good. In any event, I am not prepared in present situation to absent myself from my Command for even shortest period and still remain responsible for it.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

9 March 1942

Am certain that I cannot leave Mideast in present circumstances. Situation is entirely different from that obtaining last July, and I am not prepared to delegate authority to anyone while strategical situation is so fluid and liable to rapid change. I can give no more information regarding tank situation than I have already given, nor would my coming home make it more possible to stage an earlier offensive.

I earnestly ask you, therefore, to reconsider your request. If you desire it I will gladly send senior staff officer who can explain tank situation in more detail.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

9 March 1942

I put your telegram of March 8 before C.O.S. this morning for their consideration. Many important factors bearing on present situation are now being actively considered here, such as Malta, Levant-Caspian front, Far Eastern situation, allotment of forces as between you and Wavell, relative armoured strengths in Cyrenaica, etc. Other C.O.S. are in full agreement with me that it is most desirable that you should if possible come home for consultation these matters.

We wish, therefore, to impress on you the urgency for such a visit, provided you are not expecting to be engaged in active operations within the next week or so.

Since I discussed your first message with C.O.S. the Prime Minister has received your reply, and has instructed me to impress on you the importance of your coming home for consultation.

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that from March 7 Brooke was Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

‘VERY ILL-CONTENT’

Could not Wilson answer for you during the few days you would be away ?

There was an interval of three days before Auchinleck replied. He was not sulking however, but away from G.H.Q. on a visit to Quinan, Tenth Army, in Iraq. His answer was, therefore, sent from Mosul.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*12 March 1942*

Reorganization, redistribution and possibility of active operations in this Command make it impossible to leave even for short time while retaining responsibility. Could not ask Wilson to answer for me in circumstances even for a fortnight.

Suggest that great value would result from visit by you and if possible C.A.S. to Cairo or Baghdad. Wavell and Peirse could probably come for conference at which all questions mentioned in your cable of March 9 could be discussed.

Am most anxious to give all help to you and Defence Minister at present time. Have explained my situation as fully and frankly as I can. Fear have not made it clear owing to limitations of cable communication. Feel sure that explanation on the spot is best solution.

The effects of the receipt of this telegram were described by Brooke in his diary of March 13:

Drafted letter to P.M. about it; however, he called up from Chequers and I had to tell him about it. He was infuriated and once again suggested relieving him of his Command. Would not agree to Auchinleck's suggestion that I should go out with Chief of Air Staff. . . . In the afternoon another call from Chequers, P.M. saying he would now send telegram to Auchinleck. I shudder at what he may put in it, and we shall have to vet it tomorrow morning!<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck's signal of March 12 crossed one from Churchill, which showed the Prime Minister's capacity to use the arts of persuasion as well as the big stick. It greeted the C.-in-C. on his return from Iraq.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*12 March 1942*

Last week I proposed to the President that he should send an

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, pp. 338-9.



additional U.S.A. division to Australia (over and above the 41st already sailed) and another one to New Zealand (three in all) provided that to save shipping the New Zealand Division and the 9th Australian Division were left in Mideast. He readily consented and I have made the offer to Australia and New Zealand. Should they accept, as their interest urges, position in Levant-Caspian theatre would be eased. Furthermore, President has granted my request for American shipping to carry two British divisions to Mideast or India as situation may require. Finally we are moving in British shipping another three divisions from U.K. (one of which, the 5th, sails shortly) interspersed with drafts and details in next five convoys including March. Total British divisions to move is thus five during period March to July. I consider this a very great improvement especially if Australians and New Zealanders agree.<sup>1</sup>

Churchill's explanation of Auchinleck's refusal of his urgent invitation to go to London was that the Commander-in-Chief 'conceived himself stronger in resisting from his own Headquarters the requests which he knew would be made to him'.<sup>2</sup> This was far from fair. Auchinleck believed that it was his duty to stay where he was, and not to consume time and energy on a journey which, from his standpoint as much as from the Prime Minister's, would be fruitless. In the circumstances his decision was a reasonable one; seen in a longer perspective, it was a calamitous error of judgment. Had he gone home, either the atmosphere of hostility and suspicion would have been dissipated and a working arrangement made, or the dispute would have been brought sharply to a head and he would have been relieved of his Command. But from now until July the Prime Minister and the Commander-in-Chief were, if not directly at loggerheads, locked in mutual misunderstanding, made all the more disagreeable for both of them because the argument had to be conducted by telegram across great distances, because of the high regard which each had for the other, and because of the grave, persistent anxieties of the time. To Brooke, as his diary has shown, it was both wearying and saddening.

This phase of the dispute culminated in two telegrams from Churchill.

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck noted at the top (to the C.G.S.): 'Not an easy one to answer?'; in the margin, 'Can you suggest a reply? I can't!'; and alongside the reference to the convoy said to be sailing shortly, 'Any official news?'

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 262.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

15 March 1942

Your appreciation of February 27 continues causing deepest anxiety here, both to the Chiefs of Staff and Defence Committee. I therefore regret extremely your inability to come home for consultation. The delay you have in mind will endanger safety of Malta. Moreover, there is no certainty that the enemy cannot reinforce faster than you, so that after all your waiting you will find yourself in relatively the same or even a worse position. Your losses have been far less than the enemy, who nevertheless chance fighting. For instance, the 7th Armoured Div. was withdrawn to the Delta to rest although its losses were far less than those of the 15th and 21st German Arm'd Divs. who came back at you with so much vigour. A very heavy German counter-stroke upon the Russians must be expected soon, and it will be thought intolerable that the 655,000 men ex Malta on your ration strength should remain unengaged preparing for another set-piece battle in July.

A limited offensive to Derna, of which you hold out some prospect, would have the advantage at any rate of coming to grips with the enemy and forcing him to consume lives, munitions, tanks and aircraft. In that case, if he beats your armour you would have to retire to your defensive zone. But if you beat his armour no one here understands why you should not press your advantage and go farther.

In your appreciation you estimate possible by March 1 that enemy may have in Libya 475 medium tanks and by April 1, 630. We now know . . . that on 11th, Panzer Army Africa had in forward area 159 tanks serviceable and Italians 87, total 246, or barely half the number you credited them with by March 1. Moreover, this including the German type of light tanks. Against this War Office report that on March 2 you had serviceable in Western Desert: cruisers, British Crusader, American M3 medium and American M3 light 174; serviceable in the Delta 197; new arrivals not yet issued 167, total 538. And 'I' tanks additional, including six being unloaded, 252. Total serviceable 790. On your own estimate, by April 1 you will have ready for battle in forward area 330 medium tanks and 100 Valentines, total 430. This takes no account of the large number of unserviceable but repairable.

. . . I have done everything in my power to give you continuous support at heavy cost to the whole war. It would give me the greatest pain to feel that mutual understanding had ceased. In order to avoid this I have asked Sir Stafford Cripps to stop for a day in Cairo about 19th or 20th on his way to India, and put

before you view of the War Cabinet. He will be joined by General Nye, who is proceeding separately, and is fully possessed of the Chiefs of Staff's opinions. It is impossible for C.I.G.S. to leave the centre at this moment.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

17 March 1942

I ought to have added the following to my message of March 15. If, as a result of all discussions, it is decided that you must stand on defensive until July, it will be necessary at once to consider the movement of at least fifteen air squadrons from Libya to sustain Russian left wing in the Caucasus.

Brooke advised the Prime Minister not to send this telegram; but Churchill insisted, saying (according to General Kennedy), 'It will be a whip to him.'

Auchinleck was not the man to submit to the whip from anybody, even the Prime Minister. What, indeed, had he done to merit such cruel and such shabby treatment? There was much more to come.

\* \* \*

Sir Stafford Cripps, then Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons, was about to proceed to India for constitutional negotiations with the Indian political leaders and the Viceroy. General Nye, the young and talented V.C.I.G.S., was fully in the confidence of the Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff. The purpose of their joint mission to Cairo—Churchill made no bones about it—was to prod Auchinleck into taking the offensive on his Western Front before he was ready to do so. Nye was armed with a formidable list of twenty questions, the answers to which he was to cable to London at once.<sup>1</sup>

It was an odd way in which to treat a responsible Commander; but Auchinleck bore no resentment (though Cripps felt a 'prickly' atmosphere on his arrival), and with Tedder and Admiral Cunningham's representative in Cairo, Captain Norman, set out to state the Middle East case. Also present at the discussions was the Deputy Minister of State, Sir Walter Monckton, who was acting with full Ministerial responsibility until the arrival of Lyttelton's successor. There was an element of rueful comedy about the results. The relentless inquisitors were turned at once into stalwart allies, fully

<sup>1</sup> A specimen question and answer (about the Germans' superior standards of training and leadership) were set out by Sir Compton Mackenzie in *Eastern Epic*, p. 538.

persuaded of the strength of Auchinleck's arguments. It was unjust of Churchill to say that Cripps 'only touched upon the surface of things'.<sup>1</sup> He made a close and pertinent examination of every aspect of the case. His clear, analytical and well-disciplined mind had never worked better.

*Sir Stafford Cripps to Prime Minister*

21 March 1942

I am very satisfied with the atmosphere at Cairo after our talks. Last night I had a long and most friendly talk with Auchinleck, Nye, Tedder, Cunningham's deputy, and Monckton, at which I went through my telegram to you in detail. They were all most helpful and co-operative. When I first arrived I felt a rather prickly atmosphere, which was also apparent on Nye's arrival. That has now completely disappeared, and everyone, including Nye, was most happy when we left early this morning. I do not think there will be any need for you to trouble to come out, and I think you would find journey long and difficult. I hope you will get all additional detail you want from Nye before he returns home. I have no doubts as to Auchinleck's offensive [spirit], but I think his Scottish caution and desire not to mislead by optimism cause him to overstress in statement the difficulties and uncertainties of situation. I am convinced of his determination to face these, and am sure that it will help him very much if he can now be made to feel that all misunderstandings are at an end and there is no more questioning of his desire to take offensive. If you accept situation as detailed in my long telegram, as I much hope you will, it would, I am sure, help if you could send Auchinleck a short friendly telegram expressing your satisfaction that he will have all possible help from you to hit the target at the appointed time.

Churchill commented: 'I was very ill-content with all this and the long telegram of technical detail which accompanied it.'<sup>2</sup>

The accompanying telegram *was* long. It set out with cogency all the arguments which the Middle East Defence Committee had marshalled, on which they were in complete agreement, and which they had fully persuaded Cripps and Nye to accept. But buried in the mass of admittedly formidable technical detail were certain very important references to the date of the offensive which the Commander-in-Chief was being urged to launch:

Auchinleck takes the view that it is unlikely that anything can

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 264.

be done before about mid-May, and I agree that an attempt to make an attack before that would be to take an unwarrantable risk. This is subject of course to enemy not making some earlier move which would give us an opportunity which may occur. He thinks that there should be a good possibility of attack about mid-May and is working to that date, but all necessary help must be given with the urgent requirements which I detail at the end of this telegram. . . .

I suggest that the mid-May date be accepted as the target and that everything possible be done to prepare for that date both here and at home. I am not suggesting that there is any want of effort here as I am sure there is not, but merely that an effort should be organized for that particular time. In this respect the urgent requirements for action at home are as follows:

(a) Despatch to Malta of the remaining Spitfires now in Gibraltar.

(b) Immediate despatch of heavy bombers capable of reaching Tripoli.

(c) Expediting of light bombers from U.S.A. by every possible means so as to arrive at earliest date.

(d) Sending out of fitters by air who could be taken from other less urgent work and put to build up the reserve of tanks which will be vital factor and deal with repairs when the offensive starts.

(e) Cessation of any further demands upon this front to send aircraft to India or elsewhere.

Nye will be able to send you any detailed explanation of this based on the Questionnaire which you approved.

I have shown this telegram to Auchinleck, Tedder and Norman (acting for Cunningham) and they agree with its contents as also does Monckton.

*Prime Minister to General Nye*

*22 March 1942*

I have heard from the Lord Privy Seal. I do not wonder everything was so pleasant, considering you seem to have accepted everything they said, and all *we* have got to accept is the probable loss of Malta and the Army standing idle, while the Russians are resisting the German counter-stroke desperately, and while the enemy is reinforcing himself in Libya faster than we are.

Do not hasten your return, but go into the questions of tank serviceability, armament, and the use of manpower in the Middle East searchingly.

Also let me have precise answers to your twenty questions by cable in good time before you leave, so that we can comment on them here.

Finally, try to form an opinion about possibility of enemy offensive, either from the west or across the sea from Greece, the latter (a) by air or (b) by ships. This of course would alter the picture altogether.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

The Prime Minister's indignation was not at all abated. He was in several minds at once. He thought of replacing Auchinleck by Gort, by Wavell, by Nye, or by Alexander. Sir Arthur Bryant has called these suggestions ‘impulsive’; but the Prime Minister worked always by impulse, and many of his impulses were of immeasurable value to his country and to civilization. Alan Brooke noted in his diary on March 24: ‘It is very exhausting, this continual protection of Auchinleck.’ Sir Arthur said that though Brooke's faith in the Middle East Command and staff was growing more and more shaken, he did not feel justified in changing its Commander.<sup>2</sup> He dissuaded the Prime Minister from taking such a course. Though he doubtless did this from the best of motives, it was a mistake. Never was the truth of Dill's dictum, quoted at the beginning of Book III, more sternly demonstrated.

The excellence of Brooke's motives was tellingly revealed in this telegram:

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

31 March 1942

I am sure you will realize the importance of starting your offensive as near to the accepted date as possible always provided that circumstances when the time comes indicate reasonable chance of success. It has not been easy to convince the Prime Minister and Defence Committee as to the necessity for delay and I am certain that any further delays will be unacceptable unless you produce overwhelming reasons. But everything is now clear as a result of our voluminous exchange of cables which I am afraid was unavoidable. I often feel how valuable a talk with you would be but we are both so tied in these critical days that it is impossible at the moment. I hope that Nye's visit has been of assistance to you and am looking forward to hearing account of his visit when he returns. All good wishes and hoping to be able to come for a visit before long.

On the same day Brooke wrote a letter to Auchinleck amplifying these points:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>2</sup> *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 339.

My dear Auk,

I have just been told that there is a chance of sending you a letter tomorrow so am rushing off a few lines.

I am sorry that you should have had the difficult times that you have been through lately, and I can assure you that it was not owing to lack of efforts to save you from it.

Some of the telegrams which you did not like were the results of saving you from more unpleasant ones.

We have now got the P.M. to accept your dates and arguments, but not in a very pleasant manner. He is accepting the delays only under protest, and with little grace!

It was a pity you could not come home as I believe it would have assisted matters.

I do hope that circumstances will work out now so that you can live up to your forecasts, otherwise I foresee difficult times ahead of us.

I do not think you realize how difficult he is to handle at times. In that aspect Oliver Lyttelton should be a great help in the future as he knows your difficulties and troubles and can give first-hand evidence and advice. . . .

I shall do all I can to make up some of your deficiencies in troops and shall try to fill up some of your gaps. The difficulty is ensuring for the adequate safety of India at the same time.

Let me know if at any time I can help in any way, and remember that I am doing all I can to assist at this end.

Thank you very much for your Review of the situation in Libya (dated 26 February 1942). It has been most useful.

With best of luck,

Yours ever,

A. F. BROOKE.

Three days later Ismay sat down and wrote one of his characteristic letters—sagacious, sensitive, affectionate and penetrating:

I have been thinking of you so much these last few weeks, and wishing above all things that I could have a heart to heart talk with you. The written word is such a poor substitute for the spoken—but I must try.

The outstanding point is that although the P.M. is *at present* at cross purposes—and even loggerheads—with you, this is a purely temporary phase of a relationship which is marked by mutual esteem, and I might almost say affection.

You cannot judge the P.M. by ordinary standards: he is not in

the least like anyone that you or I have ever met. He is a mass of contradictions. He is either on the crest of the wave, or in the trough: either highly laudatory, or bitterly condemnatory: either in an angelic temper, or a hell of a rage: when he isn't fast asleep he's a volcano. There are no half-measures in his make-up. He is a child of nature with moods as variable as an April day, and he apparently sees no difference between harsh words spoken to a friend, and forgotten within the hour under the influence of friendly argument, and the same harsh words telegraphed to a friend thousands of miles away—with no opportunity for 'making it up'. . . .

Before you came home last time, your refusal to attack before you were ready was grudgingly admired as a sign of strength, but harshly criticized nevertheless. You came home—you had it all out in the open: the clouds of misunderstanding were dispelled: and you went back in a blaze of goodwill and confidence. Your ears would have burned, if you had known all the nice things that were said about you. Then came a temporary landslide as a result of your wire saying that you were postponing 'Crusader' for three days. I was summoned from my bed at 5 a.m. to find the storm raging. . . . Then 'Crusader' started, and up you went again. When you went up to Advanced H.Q. and saved the battle, your stock rose to dizzy heights. And it remained there, despite disappointments and the subsequent withdrawal. But with the arrival of your wire that your next 'go' could not start for some time, the scene wholly changed. . . . With the arrival of Cripps's and Nye's wires, the storm subsided somewhat and 'the date' was grudgingly accepted: but today's telegram from the Middle East Defence Committee (I do feel that the same thing could have been said in rather less 'provocative' terms!) has raised another storm.

And now let me state my own case. I think I can lay claim to having been called every name under the sun during the last six months—except perhaps a coward; but I know perfectly well in the midst of these storms that they mean exactly nothing, and that before the sun goes down, I shall be summoned to an intimate and delightfully friendly talk—to 'make it up'.

One more point. You are both indispensable, the P.M. as the only possible national leader: and you as a universally admired Commander of perhaps the most important force we have. And so you have *got* to make it up.

This leads me to the only possible conclusion. You must do what you did with such happy results last time. **YOU MUST COME HOME.** I know how hard it is for you to leave your Command at



this juncture, but nothing matters so much as the removal of the wall of misunderstanding which has grown up between you two. I know that at heart, the P.M. thinks the world of you, but he will never confess this, even to himself, until you have got together again and had the whole thing out.

I know that you are a selfless person, who cares only for the Cause: and I am writing in this strain, old friend, not because I admire you, and am so fond of you—but for that same Cause.

... Will you wire in the following sense: 'Reluctant as I am to leave my post at present, I regard it as even more important that I should come home at once for consultation. I will start as soon as I have your approval.'

All my thoughts and wishes.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

After Eighth Army had withdrawn to Gazala, and Auchinleck had had time to consider the problems of his Command as a whole, a number of changes occurred among the generals, both in command in the field and on the staff. Gott, as has been seen, replaced Godwin-Austen. Norrie, Freyberg and Tuker remained where they were. Blamey went with the two Australian divisions to New Guinea, and the post of Deputy Commander-in-Chief, never particularly satisfactory, lapsed. Since the formations never came to the Middle East out of which Auchinleck hoped to build his G.H.Q. Reserve with Ritchie in command, Ritchie remained where he was.

When Brooke became C.I.G.S. one of his first, entirely justified anxieties about the Middle East concerned the obvious deficiencies in the training and leading of armoured formations—as distinct from the mechanical shortcomings of the tanks themselves—and he was rightly determined that they should be remedied.

On January 21, the very day on which Rommel launched his counter-attack at Agedabia, which proved so fierce a test of British armour in battle, Brooke wrote to Auchinleck:

I am worried . . . that you have not got a first-class armoured force officer on your staff. . . . There is a colossal amount of work for him in the re-equipping and reforming of your armoured divisions and army tank brigades, and in the provision of general advice on armoured matters.

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck's annotations on the original are: 'Recd 19/4, and 20/4. Refused.'

On February 4 he returned to the same question:

The distribution and general state of readiness of your armoured forces at the time of Rommel's counter-attack is, I feel, an example of lack of advice on important matters connected with the handling of armoured forces. I do hope you will reconsider the advisability of appointing an armoured forces major-general on similar lines to your chief gunner and sapper.<sup>1</sup>

It should not be thought that Auchinleck was himself unaffected by perturbations similar to those of the C.I.G.S. He replied to Brooke's admonitions on February 14:

I have sent you a telegram about the Major-General A.F.V., and I think you will see that we do not really disagree on the subject. I think it must be quite clear, however, that so far as general training is concerned, the D.M.T. must be responsible to me and that the Major-General A.F.V. is his adviser in this matter as well as mine. This is on all fours with the position of the Major-General R.A. and E.-in-C. Moreover the Major-General A.F.V. must not think that he 'owns' the R.A.C. any more than the Major-General R.A. 'owns' the Gunners! All appointments, promotions, etc. must go through the M.S. to me in the same way as for the other arms. M.S. and I and the Selection Boards will, of course, freely consult the Major-General A.F.V. I feel that there should be no difficulty about this.

We have, I think, been a little at cross purposes over the whole affair due to this cursed necessity for having to argue at the end of a telegraph wire or wireless mast! As you know, we have been trying for months, almost years, to get Major-Generals for our R.A., A.A., Ordnance and S. & T. heads and I am afraid I did not think there was any hope of getting two more Major-Generals—one for D.M.T. and the other for A.F.V. Thinking I was likely to get one only, if I got any, I plumped for the D.M.T. as being the most needed in my opinion! I am sorry if we have worried you and wasted your time over this. I know you have got many more and much bigger things to think about.

If you can spare us a Major-General A.F.V. please send him along. . . .

The C.I.G.S. could and did spare a Major-General A.F.V. He

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 339 (footnote).

## AUCHINLECK

was Major-General (later Sir Richard) McCreery, a former officer of the 12th Lancers, who was at that time commanding an armoured division in Home Forces.

Two other staff appointments were under consideration at this time, that of the C.G.S., and that of the D.M.I. Both officers, as has been seen, had served Auchinleck as loyally and as capably as they had served Wavell. Both of them, on missions to the United Kingdom, had come to the notice of the Prime Minister. Whether this was altogether beneficial to them—or to the Commander-in-Chief—was debatable.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*21 February 1942*

In my letter of February 6 I asked your views about relief of Arthur Smith. Have now had following note from Prime Minister: 'Is it not time that General Arthur Smith was relieved by one of the best staff officers you can find?' Could give him a corps here at once if you agree. Would you consider taking Ritchie as C.G.S. and replacing him by Beresford-Peirce? Alternatively would Galloway be really good enough? We could give you Brigadier J. K. Edwards now B.G.S. East Africa, who is very well recommended either for Sudan or as D.C.G.S. Please cable your views earliest possible.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*23 February 1942*

Apologize for not answering your letter of February 6. Letter was actually in post but owing to very rapid changes which are still going on I withdrew it and there has been no mail bag since.

I agree that Arthur Smith is due for change though he will be much missed here as he has served Mideast and myself very well. Am sorry to lose him. I did offer him 10th Corps some months ago but he refused on grounds of inexperience in command in modern war. Could he not get London Area which I am sure he would do very well? It would make everything easier if you could recall him to a definite appointment as am most anxious to avoid any impression of his being removed as unsuitable. Hope you can do this.

I do not want to take Ritchie away from Eighth Army in present circumstances. He has gripped situation, knows what to do and has the drive and ability to do it, I feel. Beresford-Peirce is not of calibre of Army commander as he has decided limitations. Galloway is not ripe for C.G.S. at present and should command first.

I would like Corbett, now Commander 4th Corps in Iraq, as C.G.S. I know him very well. He is an educated soldier with great energy and drive and has made special study this theatre for years, and during last two years has studied intensively handling and training of armoured forces. I feel we would be good half section and I hope you will agree. If change is to be made sooner the better before situation becomes critical again.

Very grateful for your telegram of February 22 which arrived after I had drafted above. Quite realize Pownall's<sup>1</sup> qualifications but would prefer Corbett as I think he will fit better. . . .

Auchinleck's choice of Corbett and his insistence on it were a proper exercise of that discretion which a commander must be allowed to possess. It was doubtful, however, whether it was a wise choice. Lieutenant-General T. S. Corbett was an Indian cavalry officer, whose merits—they were not few—Auchinleck had appreciated for some years past, both in command and on the staff. He was diligent and serious in his profession. His emotions were easily but deeply stirred. He was courageous and completely loyal. But he had had no experience of the huge and complicated G.H.Q. to which he came, and little personal knowledge of many of its officers, or of the commanders and staff officers in its subordinate formations. He knew India and the Indian Army very well—and the proportion of Indian Army units under Auchinleck's command was large and growing—but he did not know the British Army, the War Office or those responsible, either politicians or officers, for the higher, strategic direction of the war. To the Prime Minister and the C.I.G.S. he was little more than a name. Had the German attack developed, as had been expected, on the Northern Front, Corbett's experience would have been valuable. The Western Front he did not know; and for several months he could do little more than find his way about in G.H.Q.; and these months were of crucial importance.

Corbett, the new C.G.S., was at a disadvantage because he was unknown. Shearer, the much-criticized D.M.I., was at a disadvantage because he was too well known. In his letter to the C.I.G.S. written on February 14 Auchinleck defended him stoutly:

About John Shearer. If there is any blame it is mine! I really think, if you don't mind my saying so, that you are not quite fair to him. I agree that at the outset of the present campaign some of our early communiqués were too rosy but then so were my own

<sup>1</sup> Lieut.-Gen. Sir Henry Pownall, who had just been Chief of Staff to Wavell in the ill-fated A.B.D.A. Command in the Far East.

situation reviews to the Prime Minister and the C.I.G.S., and these I write myself and not at Shearer's dictation! We were misled by optimistic reports from the battle front of enemy tanks destroyed and driven off. I think these reports were genuine enough and that their inaccuracy was due to inexperience. I do not think you can say that the great majority of our communiqués or reports have been over-optimistic. I 'vet' the communiqués myself, and Arthur Smith does it for me if I am away. The Press and the B.B.C. reports at home *were* exaggerated and highly coloured but we are not responsible for these nor for high hopes expressed in public by members of the Government. I was optimistic and I am optimistic and I hope I shall stay so! When all is said and done, Rommel suffered a major defeat and I hope he will suffer another before we have done with him! I am sure you share my wishes!

I have found John Shearer's estimates of the enemy strength and intentions consistently good and with a high degree of accuracy. His figures and forecasts have been verified time and again by captured documents and prisoners' statements.

Your own Intelligence people have challenged his opinions frequently and generally have had to own that he was right and they were wrong. The same applies to the R.N. and the R.A.F. here.

I criticize and heckle him mercilessly myself and his optimism does not get past me I think. He is certainly optimistic rather than pessimistic, but a *really* pessimistic D.M.I. would not be welcome to me I'm afraid. He certainly makes mistakes, but fewer than any other Intelligence officer I have known. His organization is absolutely first-class and his originality, energy and drive are outstanding.

His advice as to cover plans and deception generally have been most valuable—in fact, invaluable.

He has made many enemies here and, I fancy, at home and it is largely his own fault that he is a controversial figure. If your people at the War Office can produce concrete proof of his dangerous over-optimism, I would be very grateful to have it. I do *not* want to part with him on any account at present, as his knowledge of this theatre and of the enemy is unique in my opinion. I feel that Middle East and the War Office, too, owe him a lot.

Little more than a week later Auchinleck felt compelled to alter his decision.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

23 February 1942

Have decided Shearer must go, not because of his alleged optimism which story is largely fictitious, but because of general loss of confidence in him, due mainly to his own personality, which has increased lately to a serious extent. Am considering successor and will cable again.

In a letter written on March 6 Auchinleck gave Brooke much fuller reasons for Shearer's departure:

I am sending John Shearer home. As I said in my telegram to you, the real reason I decided to change him was because he had lost the confidence of the Army, and especially of certain formation commanders in the Eighth Army. . . .

There is no doubt, of course, that he has many enemies, and that plenty of people are jealous of him, also that he is to some extent the victim of intrigue.

The idea that his deductions and estimates erred in being excessively optimistic is, so far as my experience goes, quite wrong. . . . I have found his conclusions borne out by facts to an extent which I consider remarkable.

You will realize that we have here literally masses of captured documents, which allow us to check our deductions and conclusions. We have had conclusive evidence that we over-estimated the enemy strength at Agheila, before they counter-attacked in January last. We are not yet sure as to the extent of our over-estimation, but there is no doubt that we did.

However, this does not alter the fact that he must go, despite his undoubted ability and organizing powers.

With regard to these organizing powers, I think credit must be given to Shearer for what he has done for us in the Middle East, as I think it makes a most remarkable story. As I was not here myself at the beginning, I have asked Arthur Smith to have an account prepared, a précis of which is attached to this letter.

. . . I cannot stand by and see a staff officer of mine accused, however justly, of certain shortcomings, without bringing to your notice his outstanding services to the common cause, and I hope you will find yourself able to recognize these services in a suitable manner when the time comes.

For the future, I understand that Shearer wishes to devote all his energies and abilities to furthering our efforts to beat the enemy, and that he hopes to find suitable employment under the

Ministry of War Production. As I have tried to show, his organizing powers are outstanding, and he has ten years' business experience added to twenty years' Army service. He is too valuable to be allowed to lie fallow.

Arthur Smith, in his attached note, reinforced in detail the Commander-in-Chief's appraisal of Shearer's valuable work, mentioned that he had founded G.S.I., M.E.F. in February 1940, when it consisted of one officer and a half-share in a room and a half-share in a clerk; that the department had worked in notable harmony, with enthusiasm and interest, under Shearer's leadership; and that during twenty-three months' tenure of his appointment Shearer had taken no leave at all.<sup>1</sup>

His successor was Colonel (later Major-General Sir Francis) de Guingand.

\* \* \*

The lull was as eventful for Rommel as it was for Auchinleck, and as full of difficulties, frustrations and disappointments. There was, however, this considerable difference between the opposing Commanders: Rommel was winning the confidence and the support of his High Command; confidence in Auchinleck was ebbing in London. But even for Rommel it was uphill work. In March he flew to Hitler's Headquarters to discuss future operations in North Africa. He was not enthusiastic about the results of his visit. Everyone at O.K.W. was engrossed in preparations for the summer offensive in Russia, and the prospect of conquering Egypt seemed of minor interest.<sup>2</sup> Halder, in particular, the Chief of Staff of the Reichswehr, showed his disapproval of Rommel's proposals in a marked manner. Hitler himself was amiable, but made it clear that there could be no major reinforcements for Libya.

O.K.W., however, had by now recognized the importance of Malta; and a determined effort to neutralize it by bombing, and then to capture it, was planned at this conference. Kesselring agreed to a series of continuous attacks by the Luftwaffe. More than two thousand tons of bombs were dropped on the island in March, and nearly seven thousand tons in April; Kesselring himself has said

<sup>1</sup> On his return to the United Kingdom, Brig. Shearer left the Army and became a Managing Director of the United Kingdom Commercial Corporation, and thereafter pursued a remarkably successful business career.

<sup>2</sup> The German General Staff did not subscribe to Napoleon's view that Egypt was the most important country in the world.

that the main assault began on April 2, and that by May 10 he could regard his part of the task as completed.<sup>1</sup> The Italian General, Cavallero, meanwhile had been urging a combined Italo-German airborne assault; and for this operation, known by the code-name 'Hercules', Hitler agreed to let him have a German parachute division.

At the end of April Hitler presided over another conference at Obersalzberg, attended by Mussolini, Cavallero and Kesselring. The purpose of the meeting was another survey of future policy in Africa. Rommel wanted to attack the British in Libya during May, and to capture Tobruk; he was anxious that Malta should be taken, but if this could not be accomplished before June, he preferred to launch his attack on the Gazala line without waiting for Malta to fall. The Axis believed that they had plenty of evidence that Eighth Army was preparing an offensive, and characteristically Rommel was eager to strike first. The directive issued after the Obersalzberg meeting, agreed to by Hitler and Mussolini, was that Rommel should be allowed to attack, provided that as soon as he had taken Tobruk he should stand on the defensive, while the main weight of the Axis attack was concentrated on Malta.

Rommel left his own subsequent appraisal of the situation in the Desert campaign at this time.<sup>2</sup> He regarded O.K.W.'s reluctance to accept a major commitment in this theatre of war as 'sadly short-sighted and misguided'. He accepted the overriding priority of the Russian front, but believed that some less important sectors could have been found which could have spared him a few mechanized divisions. 'Basically, however,' he concluded, 'there was no understanding of the situation and thus no will to do anything.'

May, therefore, was for both sides the decisive month. In the spring as in the previous autumn the coincidence of dates was significant; it was not fortuitous but was dictated by tactical and logistical factors set within the strategic framework. The differences of opinion which arose on either side were as ironic as they were interesting. Auchinleck and the German High Command had the long-range strategic view, O.K.W. concerned about their Russian front, and Auchinleck about his Northern Front; the British Prime Minister and Rommel concentrated their attention on the Mediterranean and North Africa.

The influence of sea power on the conduct of the war as a whole was manifest on both sides. For the Axis the Battle of the Atlantic was a strategic operation which failed; the size and the number of the convoys which reached the Middle East by the long and

<sup>1</sup> *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring*, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 191-4.



hazardous route round the Cape of Good Hope were proof both of the valour and skill of the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy, and of the magnitude of the enemy's failure. But tactically, in the Mediterranean, the battle had gone in their favour, during Rommel's retreat to Agedabia and thereafter. If Malta could have been finally eliminated, this victory would have been complete. Rommel said that Kesselring's heavy raids on the island in March and April 'practically neutralized' for a time Malta's threat to his sea supply routes. 'It was this fact which made possible an increased flow of material to Tripoli, Benghazi and Derna—the reinforcement and refitting of the German-Italian forces thereupon proceeded with all speed.'<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Rommel had less cause to be exasperated by his High Command than he thought.

\* \* \*

On the British side, Auchinleck's difficulties were more complex than Rommel's, as his responsibilities were far greater. The interaction of his strategic and his tactical tasks was constant. He had to make certain of the success of the Desert offensive which he was perpetually being urged to launch, not merely because a tactical defeat might have unfortunate local repercussions, but because, if he weakened himself there irretrievably, he would make his task of defending the Middle East as a whole impossible of fulfilment. However much attention he gave to the Desert, he could not afford to forget the Northern Front. In March and in April he prepared two careful studies of the Libyan offensive.<sup>2</sup> In that written on March 21 he stated: 'Our permanent and overriding object is to secure our bases in Egypt and Iraq against enemy attack,' and reached six firm conclusions:

- (i) That our first objective is to secure Cyrenaica.
- (ii) That in securing Cyrenaica we must destroy as much as possible of the enemy's army.
- (iii) That to secure Cyrenaica we must be able to maintain sufficient forces in the El Agheila neighbourhood to hold it against heavy enemy attack.
- (iv) That the sooner we can launch an offensive the better.
- (v) That, to give our offensive a reasonable chance of success,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> Printed in full in his Despatch as Appendixes 12 and 13.

# 'VERY ILL-CONTENT'

we should have a numerical superiority in tanks of fifty per cent over the Germans, and equality with the Italians.

(vi) That a limited offensive to secure the landing grounds in the Derna-Martuba area is likely to need the same relative superiority in tanks as an offensive to recover Cyrenaica, and has nothing to recommend it except that it may be possible, from the maintenance point of view, before the latter.

There was an annexure to this document which set out the comparative tank strengths of the opposing forces:

	<i>Our tanks</i>		<i>Enemy tanks</i>		<i>Total</i>
		<i>German</i>	<i>Italian</i>		
<i>1 April 1942</i>					
Best case for us	(a) 300	260	90		350
Worst case for us	(a) 300	360	140		500
<i>15 May 1942</i>	(b) 450	350	300	(c) 650	
<i>1 June 1942</i>	(b) 600	350	300	(c) 650	

(a) Infantry tanks, numbering 150, have been omitted. There are 300 cruiser tanks with approximately forty per cent Grants.

(b) Infantry tanks, numbering 150, have been omitted.

(c) This represents 'worst case' for us. It is not possible at this date to state a 'best case'.

A month later, on April 20, he reaffirmed the object of the offensive, and set forth at length his considerations on the best way in which to attain this object and his deductions from those considerations. The essence of his argument was that, in view of the relative tank strengths, it would be necessary to induce the enemy armour to attack us on grounds favourable to us; that this could be done by threatening something so vital to him that he would have to move to guard it; and that the best target for this threat was Benghazi. The plan which he worked out in detail was most ingenious, full of feints and deception, and of determination to lure Rommel to fight on ground unfavourable to him. The estimate of the forces required was: two or three armoured divisions, depending on the strength of the enemy armoured forces in the forward area; one motor brigade group; four infantry divisions; and two infantry brigade groups.

These two documents should have given the conclusive answer to the charge, being made with greater and greater frequency and vehemence in London, that Auchinleck had begun to think defensively. He was thinking realistically; and had he been permitted—not by the enemy but by his own higher Command—to fight his own

battle in his own fashion and at the time he chose, the effects of that realism might have been momentous.

He was not, however, to be left alone. Cripps, on his way home from his Indian mission, made a short stay in Cairo.

*Prime Minister to Lord Privy Seal*

14 April 1942

I hope you will not let it be thought that we here are not deeply concerned with the prolonged inaction of the Libya Army. It seems to me quite possible that Rommel will grow stronger at a greater rate than our people. Now that one submarine flotilla has to go from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and the air attack on Malta makes it impossible to station bombers there, the route from Italy to Tripoli will not be much obstructed. Besides this, the Middle East Air will be increasingly drawn upon for the Indian emergency. There is no use pressing a general beyond his better judgment, but I should like you to know that my opinion and that of the Staff here is unaltered.

Such was the effect—or lack of it—of Nye's return to London, having reached full understanding of and agreement with Auchinleck's attitude. Nye's views were as readily brushed aside as Cripps's had been. The Prime Minister's image of Auchinleck—cautious, inconsiderate and unappreciative both of the urgency of the situation and of the help that he had been given—now imposed itself on the minds of all those in London responsible for the strategic direction of the war. Auchinleck was fighting a losing battle not against Rommel but against his own superiors, and he was fighting it blindfold.

On April 7 Kennedy noted in his diary:

Reading between the lines of Auchinleck's telegrams, I don't think he will do it—anyhow in May.<sup>1</sup>

During April the attention of the Prime Minister and of the Chiefs of Staff was directed dramatically to the plight of Malta. The newly appointed Minister of State in the Middle East, Mr. Robert Casey, passed through Malta on his way to take up his new post. He reported to London that the gallant Governor of the island, Sir William Dobbie, V.C., was now worn out by his exertions, and recommended his immediate replacement. On Brooke's advice the Prime Minister appointed Lord Gort, V.C., the former C.-in-C. of the B.E.F., at that moment Governor of Gibraltar. Of the significance of Malta there could be no doubt; but it is clear that personal and emotional considerations dominated those of sheer strategic

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 225.

realism. It was held in London that it was essential to launch the Libyan offensive in order to relieve Malta; the truth was that it was essential to hold Malta in order to make it possible to launch the Libyan offensive. During the period in which Malta was pounded into uselessness, more than a quarter of a million tons of Axis munitions, armaments and oil were carried safely across the Mediterranean. This was why Malta mattered, but the authorities in London saw its significance the other way round.

This is not to say that they were by any means blind to the major dangers of the strategic situation which faced the alliance at this time. Alan Brooke himself, though outwardly calm and confident and decisive, was privately beset with doubts. His entry in his diary on March 31 was indicative of his mood in these weeks:

During the last fortnight I have had for the first time . . . a growing conviction that we are going to lose this war unless we control it very differently and fight it with more determination. . . .<sup>1</sup>

It cannot but be regarded as most unfortunate that Brooke and Auchinleck, whose minds in fact were far more in tune than their exchanges of letters and telegrams at this time would suggest, were unable to meet and to unburden their hearts to each other.

With the Japanese in complete control of the whole of south-east Asia, with Alexander bringing the remnants of a beaten, but not broken, army out of Burma, with Japanese warships and aircraft ranging out into the Indian Ocean, the general picture in April 1942, seemed profoundly gloomy.

On April 23 the House of Commons met in secret session and heard the Prime Minister render as full an account as he could of the causes and consequences of the bitter reverses which had had to be borne. It was a sombre and unhappy story, the unfolding of which was a task to which Churchill addressed himself with fortitude and frankness.

In a passage of especial significance he outlined Britain's military position at the outbreak of the Japanese war. He told the House of Roosevelt's offer of enough shipping to transport two divisions to the Middle East. He explained that the first of these had been rounding the Cape in early December, that the 17th Indian Division had also been about to move from India to the Middle East at the same time and that both were immediately diverted to Malaya. He mentioned 'other very considerable forces' which were similarly diverted. He continued:

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 343.

All these forces were sorely needed either in Libya, where General Auchinleck's offensive was at its height, or on the threatened Levant-Caspian front. The fact that they, and many other forces that have followed them, were turned to meet the new antagonist, in no way lessens the need for them in the Middle East. This may become painfully apparent should the magnificent Russian defence of the approaches to the Caucasus be beaten down, or General Rommel be able to assume the offensive against Egypt in superior strength.

The House must face the position squarely. Not only have we failed to stem the advance of the new enemy, but we have had to weaken seriously the hopeful operations we were carrying on against the old.<sup>1</sup>

On this same grim St. George's Day the Chiefs of Staff sent out a general situation review by telegram to overseas commanders. The picture which it drew, especially of calamitous expectations of Japanese advances in the Indian Ocean against India, was extremely dismal. For perfectly valid reasons Auchinleck was especially sensitive to the idea of any threat to India. The impact of this document<sup>2</sup> was therefore severe. It must be considered as a major cause of the final breach between the Prime Minister and Auchinleck.

On April 27 Auchinleck presented to the Middle East Defence Committee a paper embodying the conclusions to which he had been compelled by a full consideration of the Chiefs of Staff's review.

'It seems to me,' he said, 'to demand from us a complete reconsideration of our present policy and strategic plans.' He continued:

2. Briefly, the facts are these:

(a) Our sea forces are so weak as to make it doubtful whether they can stop the enemy gaining command at sea in the Eastern Mediterranean.

(b) Our air forces are not nearly strong enough to be able to ensure even a measure of air superiority on our Northern and Western Fronts, should these become active simultaneously. Neither can they defeat a serious enemy air attack on our bases in Egypt by counter-attacks against the enemy air bases.

(c) We are in grave doubt as to our ability to save Malta, and in consequence to prevent the enemy freely reinforcing Libya if he so wishes.

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Session Speeches* by Winston S. Churchill, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> There is no copy of it in the Auchinleck papers.

(d) Our land forces are much too weak to withstand a heavy enemy attack against Syria or Iraq or both, and at the same time hold our Western Front against the force which the enemy might deploy to attack it.

(e) It is obvious from the Chiefs of Staff's review that such sea, land and air forces as may become available this summer are likely to be sent to India, and that the Middle East will probably be left to look after itself with the forces now available, in the hope that our bluff will not be called.

3. This statement of the situation may be thought pessimistic, but it is true, and facts must be faced. Various factors may prevent the situation deteriorating to the extent described, and, if they do, so much the better. All the same, in this present most critical world situation, I do not feel that we are justified in preparing for anything but the worst case. To do otherwise would be to gamble with our very existence.

4. At present, we are planning an early offensive in Libya, and preparing intensely for it. The success of such an offensive depends on the fulfilment of several conditions. That this will be so is yet far from certain. For example, it is doubtful whether we shall reach the necessary relative superiority in tanks to admit of our launching an offensive with fair hope of success. Again, the fact that at any time now, and at the shortest notice, we may have to withdraw a large part of our air force from Libya either to help the Turks, or to guard our Northern Front, makes the chances of launching an offensive, or of sustaining it when launched, most uncertain.

Our situation, should we find ourselves compelled to call off an offensive just begun, and still undecided, is likely to be hazardous, and might seriously impair our ability to pass successfully to the defensive.

It is not as if a partially successful offensive is likely to enable us to release any large proportion of troops from Libya for the defence of the Northern Front. In fact the reverse is likely to be the case, as there is no position so easily defensible as Gazala, between Tobruk and El Agheila. Given adequate reserves, the risk might be accepted, but we have no reserves whatever.

5. Our ability to keep our forces in the field depends almost entirely on the continuous receipt of tanks, armoured cars and, especially, transport vehicles of all kinds in very great quantity.

It is clear from the Chiefs of Staff's review that they expect our sea communications to be subjected to early and serious interruption, even though they do not think that Ceylon is likely to be

Japan's next objective. My own opinion on this point is that Ceylon is just as likely to be their next objective as is north-east India. If I am right, and the Chiefs of Staff are wrong, this interruption may come sooner than they think.

Here again, we must prepare for the worst, and the fact remains that if the flow of mechanical vehicles to this Command is seriously interrupted, our land forces will rapidly cease to be mobile, and therefore to have any real fighting value, even in defence.

The reserves of ammunition, supplies and stores generally are adequate, but we have *no* reserves of vehicles. In fact, we are about fifty thousand vehicles short of our full requirements. *All* these vehicles must come through the Indian Ocean.

6. I realize fully the political and strategic desirability of making an offensive movement in Libya as soon as possible, but I cannot conceal from myself or the Committee that, to launch such an offensive at the present time, with the general military situation so desperate as the Chiefs of Staff depict it, is to take a tremendous risk.

If the immediate political and strategic results of an even partially successful offensive in Libya were likely to affect decisively the course of the war in this theatre, or in any other theatre, I would not hesitate to advocate it. Even if fully successful, however, such an offensive could not materially affect the chances of a successful defence of our Northern Front, nor could it arrest the Japanese progress towards India and the Persian Gulf. It could have little material effect on the coming campaign in Russia, though it might have some moral value. The forces involved are relatively so small as to make the effect of operations in Libya almost negligible when viewed against the Russian background.

On the other hand, failure on our part in Libya is likely to have an immediate and most far-reaching effect not only on the Middle East, but on the whole world situation. Whether the threat to Egypt from the north materializes or not, the threat from the west is constant, and may easily grow.

The weakening of our forces in Libya can only be made good by withdrawals from the Northern Front, and, as I have said, our forces there are already far too weak for their task.

7. I am, therefore, forced most reluctantly to the conclusion that in our present critical situation we cannot afford to take the offensive in Libya, but must on the contrary concentrate all our efforts on strengthening our defensive arrangements throughout

the Middle East, and at the same time devote every resource that can be spared to the reinforcement of India, in order to check the Japanese advance before it is too late. I ask the Defence Committee to consider the urgent desirability of advising the Chiefs of Staff accordingly.

I am urgently examining the possibility of sending troops from here to India or Ceylon in the immediate future.

With this paper Auchinleck offered the Defence Committee a draft telegram to the Chiefs of Staff, setting out in similar terms the arguments which he had marshalled.<sup>1</sup> This draft was not sent; but after a full discussion a telegram embodying his conclusions, and unanimously agreed by the Defence Committee, was sent. This reached London on May 4.

The D.M.O. was in the C.I.G.S.'s room when the Prime Minister rang and asked Brooke his opinion of the telegram. Brooke answered that Auchinleck had not got up-to-date information of the situation in India; he did not know that the Chiefs of Staff, in the fortnight that had elapsed since the preparation of their strategic review, had changed their minds, and now considered it more likely that the Japanese would continue their operations in China and in the islands to the north and north-east of Australia, rather than press on in the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup>

Brooke had by then not received a long letter which Auchinleck wrote on May 3 and sent home by the hand of Major-General Scobie, his D.A.G., in which he supported the conclusion which he had reached by cogent and closely-reasoned argument:

I must apologize for not having written you a proper letter for so long, but, as usual, I find I am kept pretty hard at it. Also, I hope Nye took the place of many letters and was able to give you a real picture of what we are doing and how we stand.

2. The matter most in my mind at the moment is the threat to India. The Chiefs of Staff's signal of April 23 giving your views on the situation alarmed me considerably. In fact, for the first time since this war started, I began to have serious misgivings as to the outcome of it. I brought the matter to the notice of the Defence Committee here and they agreed this morning to send a signal to the Chiefs of Staff giving our views.

3. I hope you will not think we are being 'busy' by meddling in matters about which the Chiefs of Staff must know much more

<sup>1</sup> There is no copy of it in the Auchinleck papers.

<sup>2</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 225.



than we do. As I have said, I am seriously perturbed and cannot help wondering whether the dependence of the Middle East on India, strategically and materially, is fully realized at home. I feel it must be, but, all the same, there are elements in the present situation which do not seem to fit with a logical view of it. For instance, India is still sending fighting troops to the Middle East, which is very nice for us, but hardly in keeping with her own apparently very urgent need for all the trained soldiers she can muster.

4. There are now 82,000-odd Indian soldiers in formations in this country and 133,929 others not in formations—a total of 216,270 or about a quarter of the whole. Of the fourteen divisions now under my command, six are Indian. There is the equivalent of eight and a half divisions of Indian fighting troops in the Middle East. We are still dependent on India for great quantities of munitions of all kinds. For instance, we drew from her in March about 90,000 tons, including 49,000 tons of R.E. stores and 10,000 tons of ordnance stores. We are particularly dependent on India for steel.

How it is proposed to replace India as a source of men and munitions should she be invaded by the Japanese, I do not know. Moreover, what the attitude of the Indian troops will be if this situation arises is doubtful, to say the least of it. Magnificently as they have fought till now, often under great handicaps, they may not stand the strain of so hard a test on their loyalty, which is, as you know, not to England but largely to their officers. I feel that these considerations may not have been presented correctly to the Chiefs of Staff or the Defence Minister.

I believe myself that there is no shadow of doubt that we cannot afford to lose India or even to contemplate its loss. This I believe quite apart from the great uncertainty of our being able to hold on to the Middle East if India goes, because of the threat to our communications.

5. Our life-line here runs through the Indian Ocean from South Africa to Suez and from India to Basra and Suez. With the Japanese at Colombo and Bombay I wonder how long we should be able to supply ourselves and how long it would be before our oil supplies from the Persian Gulf were cut off? I quite realize the value of the Middle East as a base for the future offensive designed to reopen the Mediterranean and to carry the war against Germany into Europe. We put this project clearly to the Chiefs of Staff some months ago—before Japan had gained her very startling successes against us on the sea, on the land and in the air. The situation now has completely changed.

6. I feel very strongly that the time has come when we must decide what is vital to our continued existence and what is not. We lost Singapore and then Burma chiefly, I feel, because we did not or could not decide to concentrate our resources on holding what really mattered, while letting less important places go. I am not presuming to criticize and I know I am being wise after the event, but I do hold very strongly that we can no longer afford to dissipate our meagre resources in trying to hold everything irrespective of its permanent, as opposed to its temporary, value.

7. I may be wrong, but I feel that India is vital to our existence and that, once it goes, our hopes of recovery within a reasonable period of years are small indeed.

If I had to choose now between losing India and giving up the Middle East, I would not hesitate. I believe that we can still hold India without the Middle East, but that we cannot for long hold the Middle East without India.

8. Do not mistake me. I am not advocating a withdrawal from the Middle East. Far from it, and I see no immediate reason for any such drastic step, even if you do decide to weaken us to strengthen India. Even if we had to leave Egypt, after having thoroughly blocked the Canal, we might well hold on to Iraq and the oil supplies until the tide turned.

I assure you I am not in the least defeatist, but I cannot help trying to see the situation in its true perspective and that is how it looks to me.

9. As to our projected offensive in Libya, I fully realize its desirability from the political and strategical point of view, but it must be admitted that the material value to be had from it, so far as it may affect the course of the war, is small at present. Had Japan not entered the war, its effect might have been much greater and, ultimately, possibly decisive.

As I have tried to make clear several times before, the success of our offensive in Libya depends on our being able to collect sufficient tanks to have a reasonable superiority over the enemy, and on our being able to keep sufficient air forces on this front to give us a reasonable measure of air superiority. If these two conditions are not fulfilled, the launching of an offensive will be an extremely hazardous operation of war. It is even more hazardous because of the possibility, which is almost a probability, of our having to call a halt to it while still unfinished, owing to the materialization of the threat to our Northern Front.

I do not think myself that we can reasonably expect our advance through Cyrenaica to El Agheila to take less than three

months. If we do not get to El Agheila we cannot be sure of holding Cyrenaica. This requires no further proof.

If we have to stop our advance while still short of El Agheila, we are almost certain to have no choice but to withdraw to Gazala or to the positions I have prepared on the frontier about Sollum and Maddalena. The moral effect of this could hardly be good.

10. We have now got reliable information that by the end of May the enemy is likely to have effective for battle, with formations, 360 German tanks and 160 Italian.

So far we have said that, for an offensive, we need a 2 : 1 superiority over the Germans and equality with the Italians. Now because of the Grant tank and the six-pounder gun which is just coming into service, we are prepared to accept a 3 : 2 superiority only over the Germans. I must stress that there is a considerable risk in this, as we shall be attacking and cannot guarantee always to induce the enemy to fight us on ground of our choosing.

We shall also have I hope about 250 infantry tanks Valentines and Matildas which, though not suitable to join in the armoured battle, should be of considerable value, if properly used, in making the enemy detach some of his fast tanks to watch them and prevent them overrunning his infantry.

This should offset the reduced superiority over the German tank strength, which we are proposing to accept.

11. There are many other factors, of course, besides mere numbers of tanks—such as the relative strength in anti-tank guns, the efficiency of the field artillery and the handling of the supporting infantry, but it is almost impossible to assess these and I do not propose to try.

12. Let it suffice to say that, to offset 360 German and 160 Italian tanks, we should have about 700 cruiser tanks, in addition to our infantry tanks.

We have now in the forward area three armoured brigades, one of which, the 22nd, will not be fit for battle before the middle of the month, as it is still doing its collective training. This gives us roughly 450 tanks.

The next formation to be ready is the 1st Armoured Brigade, just equipped with tanks, but still very short of transport of all kinds, which is extremely scarce.

I do not see how this brigade can be ready for battle before June 15.

This would give us about six hundred cruiser tanks on that date, and although this is thirty short of the required total, I would

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be prepared to accept the added risk, and launch an offensive with them, particularly as we hope to have good reserves of tanks while the enemy is not likely to be so well off.

13. We have as yet no news as to the state of the Italian Littorio armoured division. Units of it and its Headquarters are in Libya, we know, but whether it has any tanks or not, we do not know. We hope it is merely feeding the Ariete armoured division.

If it does materialize, another 150 or so tanks must be added to the enemy strength, and this would completely do away with any superiority on our part.

14. In my opinion, it would be extremely risky to launch an offensive without the requisite superiority in cruiser tanks. I feel that such an attempt might easily result in a stalemate or even in a definite reverse; the effect of either would, I think, be disastrous.

15. I do not wish you to think that I am trying to avoid attacking the enemy. Nothing could be further from my desire. I, and, so far as I know, all the troops, are desperately anxious to get back at him. Nevertheless I feel that with so much at stake elsewhere, it is my duty to give you the facts as I see them, and I have little doubt that you will wish to put them before the Defence Minister.

\* \* \*

Auchinleck's arguments, whether presented on his behalf by liaison officers, or expressed by letter or telegram, were of no avail. In fact, they made the Prime Minister 'furious'.<sup>1</sup> It was only with the utmost difficulty that Brooke was able to persuade Churchill not to demand Auchinleck's immediate recall and supersession by Alexander.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*5 May 1942*

... While we are grateful to you for your offer to denude the Middle East further for the sake of the Indian danger, we feel that the greatest help you could give to the whole war at this juncture would be engage and defeat the enemy on your Western Front. All our directions upon this subject remain unaltered in their purpose and validity, and we trust you will find it possible to give full effect to them about the date which you mentioned to the Lord Privy Seal.

<sup>1</sup> This is the adjective used by Sir Arthur Bryant (*The Turn of the Tide*, p. 380). The account of the reception of Auchinleck's arguments at this time is reconstructed from Kennedy and Bryant.

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By May 7 the Prime Minister was so upset that Brooke feared that 'he might well take some wild decision which it would then be very hard to wean him from'. It is important to recognize the dilemma in which Brooke found himself. All his professional training and instincts led him to seek, earnestly and strenuously, to support the commander in the field and to trust his judgment. But Brooke's own faith in Auchinleck's judgment had been severely shaken. There was no easy course open to any of those involved in this strange, saddening argument.

The sense of strain was apparent on all sides. Auchinleck wrote to Brooke on May 7:

... Thank you very much ... for your efforts on our behalf. I know how difficult it is for you at that end, and you, I think, realize how hard it is for us here, and I am most grateful to you for your support and help. I must say again, however, how difficult it is for me to do my job, when the plainest statements are removed from their context and made to mean the exact opposite of what was intended. Once more, at the risk of being a frightful bore, I do ask you to try and ensure that facts are faced, and that the unpalatable as well as the palatable bits are considered!

You will know by this time that we cannot live up to our 'forecasts', as you term them. I think that if you will spare a few minutes to read the telegrams in which these 'forecasts' are mentioned, you will see that we did all in our power to prevent you or anyone else seizing on these as firm dates. We have rubbed this in several times since, but without much effect apparently. As I say, this sort of thing gets very wearing after a time, and is not exactly encouraging or conducive to full efficiency!

However, I know how it is with you too. I *fully* realize how difficult a job you have. I learned my lesson when I was home last July. I hope Oliver Lyttelton really is helping; I have a feeling he may be too absorbed in his new job to be able to help much. Nye ought to be able to help, as I think he does realize conditions out here. Not many others at home do, I am afraid—through no fault of theirs perhaps.

Corbett is doing very well indeed, and has a realistic and up-to-date outlook. ...

The new Minister of State arrived yesterday, and has started in to work straight away. He has a great deal to learn, but I like him very much.

I wish you could come out here; you would soon see then how things are for yourself. Please do not try to make me go home,

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as I really cannot leave this place for long now, and I can add nothing more to what I have said already. . . .

Brooke noted in his diary on May 8:

An unpleasant day! Difficult C.O.S. meeting, first of all considering Auchinleck's wire in which he proposes to put off his attack from May 15 to June 15. I do not like his message; it is . . . purely based on number of tanks and not on the strategical situation. He never takes into account danger that Malta is exposed to through his proposed delays. . . .

Cabinet meeting at 3 p.m. to examine Auchinleck's wire. I had to open the ball and stated that I did not consider that we could order the Auk to attack about May 15 against his advice. That we should give him till June 15, tell him to co-ordinate his attack with running of convoy to Malta, whilst being prepared to take advantage of any limited attack enemy might make as expected towards end of May. P.M. asked opinion of all attending meeting and finally drafted reply himself, in which he said that Chiefs of Staff, Defence Committee and Cabinet were unanimously of opinion that attack should, if possible, be delivered before end of May. . . .

The resultant telegram went off.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*8 May 1942*

The Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee, and the War Cabinet have all earnestly considered your telegram in relation to the whole war situation, having particular regard to Malta, the loss of which would be a disaster of first magnitude to the British Empire, and probably fatal in the long run to the defence of the Nile Valley.

2. We are agreed that in spite of the risks you mention you would be right to attack the enemy and fight a major battle, if possible during May, and the sooner the better. We are prepared to take full responsibility for these general directions, leaving you the necessary latitude for their execution. In this you will no doubt have regard to the fact that the enemy may himself be planning to attack you early in June.

On this same day, May 8, Brooke asked Kennedy what he thought about it all. Kennedy said that they were approaching the same sort of situation with Auchinleck as they had had with Wavell towards

the end of his régime, when Dill had said repeatedly to Churchill, 'You must either back your Commander-in-Chief or sack him'. He said that he thought that it would be wrong for the Cabinet to order the offensive against Auchinleck's judgment; that would put everybody in a false position. If there were reasonable doubt about the soundness of Auchinleck's appreciation, then he should be removed. General Kennedy, recording this conversation many years later, added: 'Brooke said he had come to precisely the same conclusion in bed the night before. But as the days went by, we both modified our opinions.'<sup>1</sup>

The direction which this modification assumed, and the effects which it had, were both unfortunate.

Auchinleck's reply<sup>2</sup> to the Prime Minister's telegram of May 8 reached London early on the morning of Sunday, May 10. Brooke was at his home in the country. Kennedy was on duty at the War Office. Brooke recorded in his diary the salient facts about that eventful Sunday, as he saw them:

Called up after breakfast by Director of Military Operations to be told that I was wanted for Cabinet meeting at 6 p.m. and Chiefs of Staff meeting before that to discuss latest wire from Auchinleck. He had again stuck his toes in and was refusing to attack till a later date and had sent in a . . . telegram in which he entirely failed to realize the importance of Malta and over-estimated the danger to Egypt in the event of his being defeated. We framed a proposed policy at C.O.S. in which we laid down that we considered that the value of Malta was under-estimated, whilst his argument against attack was not very convincing. Finally we suggested that he should be allowed to wait to take advantage of possible limited German offensive for Tobruk to put in a counter-stroke, but that the June convoy to Malta should be the latest date, as this afforded the last opportunity of assisting in the supply of Malta.

At Cabinet meeting I made statement of our decision. P.M. then asked individual opinion of each Minister, who practically all agreed to our proposals. P.M. then withdrew to draft a proposed wire which he read out on his return. We did not quite like it, so Chiefs of Staff were asked to withdraw to consider it and redraft it, which we did. Our proposal was accepted.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup> There is no copy of this signal in the Auchinleck papers.

<sup>3</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, pp. 381-2.

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This accepted draft went off that night. Churchill described its contents subsequently as 'definite orders which Auchinleck must obey or be relieved'. He added: 'This was a most unusual procedure on our part towards a high military commander.'<sup>1</sup>

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

10 May 1942

The Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee and the War Cabinet have again considered the whole position. We are determined that Malta shall not be allowed to fall without a battle being fought by your whole Army for its retention. The starving out of this fortress would involve the surrender of over 30,000 men, Army and Air, together with several hundred guns. Its possession would give the enemy a clear and sure bridge to Africa with all the consequences flowing from that. Its loss would sever the air route upon which both you and India must depend for a substantial part of your aircraft reinforcements. Besides this, it would compromise any offensive against Italy and future plans such as 'Acrobat' and 'Gymnast'. Compared with the certainty of these disasters, we consider the risks you have set out to the safety of Egypt are definitely less and we accept them.

2. We therefore reiterate the views expressed in paragraph 2 of our telegram of May 8, with this qualification—that the very latest date for engaging the enemy which we could approve is one which provides a distraction in time to help the passage of the June dark-period convoy.

3. This telegram, like that of May 8, is addressed to you as Military Commander-in-Chief, the Air having been placed under your general direction for the purposes of major operations.<sup>2</sup>

On May 12 Auchinleck replied only to the last paragraph.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

12 May 1942

I have informed Defence Committee of the contents of your telegram of May 10, with the exception of the last paragraph, which I have shown to Minister of State only. I appreciate the intention underlying the paragraph and am correspondingly grateful to you, but I do not think its application would do good and am pretty sure it would do harm. I do not therefore propose to act on it. My relations with Tedder are excellent as they have always been and his support and co-operation could not be bettered. I do not wish to run any risk of disturbing present good relations

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 275.

<sup>2</sup> This last paragraph was omitted in the version given by Churchill (ibid.) and by Sir Arthur Bryant in *The Turn of the Tide*.



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between three Services, and your proposal must inevitably react on naval staff as well. Hope therefore you will not insist on this change and that you will realize that I am not unappreciative in any way.

Five days elapsed. Churchill has recorded that he did not know whether Auchinleck would accept or resign.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

17 May 1942

It is necessary for me to have some account of your general intentions in the light of our recent telegrams.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

19 May 1942

1. My intention is to carry out the instructions in paragraph 2 of your message of May 10.

2. I am assuming that your telegram is not meant to imply that all that is required is an operation designed solely to provide a distraction to help the Malta convoy, but that the primary object of an offensive in Libya is still to be the destruction of the enemy forces and the occupation of Cyrenaica as a step towards the eventual expulsion of the enemy from Libya. If I am wrong in this assumption then I should be so informed at once, as plans for a major offensive differ entirely from those designed merely to produce a distraction. I am proceeding as if my assumption is right.

3. Assuming that a major offensive is to be carried out but that its inception must be so timed as to provide distraction to help the Malta convoy, the actual moment of the launching of the offensive will be governed by three considerations: first the sailing date of the convoy, second enemy action between now and then, third the relative air strength of the enemy and ourselves. All these are under close and continuous examination here.

4. There are strong signs that the enemy intends to attack us in the immediate future. If he does attack, our future action must be governed by the results of the battle and cannot be forecast now.

5. Assuming that the enemy does not attack us first, it is my intention that General Ritchie shall launch his offensive in Libya on the date which will best fit in with the object of providing the maximum distraction for the Malta convoy, and at the same time ensure the fullest degree of readiness in the forces carrying out the offensive. These considerations are mutually conflicting as you will realize and entail a certain degree of compromise which it will be my responsibility in consultation with the other

Commanders-in-Chief to determine. The importance of avoiding an abortive attack has already been fully set out . . . and does not need further explanation from me.

6. In conclusion may I ask your consideration of the fact that owing to the narrowness of our margin of superiority over the enemy both on the land and in the air, the success of a major offensive cannot be regarded as in any way certain, though everything will be done to make it as certain as possible. In any event success is not likely to be rapid or spectacular, as progress will probably have to be methodical owing to the special nature of the problem.

7. I feel therefore that it is of the greatest importance that in the first instance no publicity at all should be given to our intention to carry out a major offensive even after it has been launched. Still less should the public be led to hope for a speedy and striking success.

8. This telegram has been seen by the Minister of State, Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean and Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, who agree with it.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*20 May 1942*

1. Your paragraph 2. Your interpretation of the instructions contained in my telegram of May 10 is absolutely correct. We feel that the time has come for a trial of strength in Cyrenaica and that the survival of Malta is involved.

2. The greatest care will be taken to prevent newspaper speculation here about attacks either way in Cyrenaica. If and when a battle begins public will merely be informed heavy fighting is in progress. You must impose the same restriction at your end and we can consult together about any definite pronouncement.

3. Of course we realize that success cannot be guaranteed. There are no safe battles. But whether this one arises from an enemy attack and your forestalling or manœuvring counter-stroke, or whether it has to be undertaken by you on its own, we have full confidence in you and your glorious Army, and whatever happens we will sustain you by every means in our power.

4. I should personally feel even greater confidence if you took direct command yourself as in fact you had to do at Sidi Rezegh. On this, however, I do not press you in any way.

5. Ought not the New Zealand Division to be nearer the battle front? If you want any help in dealing with the New Zealand Government pray refer to me.

## AUCHINLECK

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

*22 May 1942*

1. Thank you very much for your telegram of May 20 and for confirmation of your instructions contained in your message of May 10. I am now absolutely clear as to my task and I will do my utmost to accomplish it to your satisfaction.

2. Thank you too for your arrangements regarding publicity which will be scrupulously followed by me here.

3. Am most grateful for your most generous expression of confidence in the Army I command and in myself and for the assurance of your support, the measure of which has been proved to us so often and so amply in the past.

4. Much as I would like to take command personally in Libya I feel that it would not be the right course to pursue. I have considered the possibility most carefully and have concluded that it would be most difficult for me to keep a right sense of proportion if I became immersed in tactical problems in Libya. I feel that a situation may arise almost at any time when I shall have to decide whether I can continue to reinforce and sustain the Eighth Army without serious hindrance, or whether I must hold back and consider the building up of our Northern Front, which I am now weakening in order to give General Ritchie all the help possible. On balance I think my place is here, but you can rely on me, I hope, to adapt myself to the situation and to take hold if need arises. I am in very close touch with General Ritchie and he is fully in my mind. I hope all will be well. . . .

5. I have considered fully the desirability of bringing the New Zealand Division out of Syria into Egypt. Apart from the political aspect, which I am sure you could settle as you so kindly offer to do, there are other considerations. I am loth to denude Syria of troops just now, partly because of the uneasy political situation in the country itself, and partly because of the possible effect on the Turks, of whose attitude I am not too sure. I feel they mean well, but circumstances may be too strong for them, and it is most important that they should not get the idea that we are weakening or becoming unable to support them. I am already bringing 10th Indian Division, a well-trained formation, from Iraq to reinforce Eighth Army should need arise, and have meanwhile sent up a brigade of 4th Indian Division as an interim reinforcement. With these reinforcements the Eighth Army will about reach saturation point so far as power to provide the army with food and water is concerned. Water especially is a very serious problem. Moreover the N.Z. Division has been severely denuded by the Government of senior officers who are needed to command

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newly raised troops in New Zealand, and it is now training officers to replace these. I am watching the whole situation very closely, and if I have to put the rest of 4th Indian Division into Cyprus to provide against a possible threat to the island, I should probably have to bring the N.Z. Division down to Egypt, but I would rather not move it at present.

6. Once more I thank you for your most sustaining message. There will be hard fighting, as there was before. I have great confidence in our troops and in our dispositions. I have a firm hope of victory and pray that it may lead to greater things.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

While these stern and protracted exchanges were at their height, Auchinleck published a brief instruction to all officers in all headquarters in his Command; it was aimed at diminishing the amount of paper-work which inevitably was increasing rapidly week by week. It was a quotation of a letter written by the Duke of Wellington about 1810, to the Secretary of State for War, Lord Bradford:

My Lord,

If I attempt to answer the mass of futile correspondence that surrounds me, I should be debarred from all serious business of campaigning.

I must remind your Lordship—for the last time—that so long as I retain an independent position, I shall see that no officer under my Command is debarred by the futile drivelling of mere quill-driving in your Lordship's Office from attending to his first duty—which is, and always has been, so to train the private men under his command that they may, without question, beat any force opposed to them in the field.

I am, My Lord,

Your obedient Servant,

WELLINGTON.

Auchinleck added beneath this trenchant communication from an equally hard-pressed commander in the field these words:

<sup>1</sup> Churchill has given, at the end of his version of these telegrams, the text of a further message to Auchinleck which he drafted but did not send because he did not wish ‘to trespass too much’ on the C.-in-C.’s own domain (op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 278). This showed a consideration as refreshing as it was rare.

## AUCHINLECK

I know that this does not apply to you, but please see to it that it never can be applied to you or to anyone working under you.

This document attained a merited fame throughout the Command. Few of the staff officers who grinned as they read it, and who took its lesson to heart or failed to do so, realized how excellent, if mordant, a private joke it was for the Commander-in-Chief himself.

\* \* \*

There were some letters, however, which Auchinleck would have been glad to have, and the quicker the better. But there was still the lapse of a full month between the writing of an important secret letter by the Commander-in-Chief to the C.I.G.S., and his receipt of the answer.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

16 May 1942

I have been making repeated attempts to write to you . . . but with the continued rush and interruptions it is impossible to settle down to write a letter worth sending off.

I have just received two long letters from you of May 3, which have been most useful in clearing a lot of ground. . . .

As regards the dangers India is running I can assure you that we have not been neglecting them and they have been causing us great anxiety! I do not, however, think that Japan intends to carry out a direct attack and invasion of either India or Australia. Her rapid advance in the South Pacific Isles has stretched her resources considerably, and the forces necessary to hold the line of islands from Burma through the Andamans, Sumatra, Java, etc., to New Guinea and beyond are a serious tax on her strength. . . .

The worst danger that I see to India at present is as the result of very active propaganda and fifth column activities operating on unfortunately somewhat fertile soil. Furthermore, the added results of carrier-borne air raids on the coast and over Calcutta industrial area must be expected.

I feel, however, that with the reinforcements now flowing out from home we ought to have enough to guard against these internal dangers, provided we have not got to divert many of these formations to come to your assistance on your Northern Front.

It is on your Northern Front that I see our main dangers, and it is there where our Achilles' heel rests for the present. The Abadan oil-fields represent the one vital area for the prosecution of the war in the Middle East, India, Indian Ocean, Australia and South

Africa. The loss of Burma and N.E.I. oil-fields, when taken into account in relation to our losses in tanker tonnage, places us in a position where the loss of Mosul and Abadan oil may well entirely cripple our operation in Middle and Far East.

The safety of this area unfortunately at present entirely depends on the resistance to be expected from Russian forces against German attacks—an unknown and doubtful element. . . .

I can so very well imagine what your feelings must have been lately with the decisions you have had to make on your Western Front. I do hope you have not felt that I did not realize what the conditions are that you are facing, and I can assure you that I have done what I could to ensure that your situation was fully appreciated and realized by the Cabinet. Some of your arguments have made it difficult to support your case, and arguments based on mathematical calculations of ratios of tank strengths to the exclusion of the main strategical arguments of the situation as a whole produced reactions on the part of the P.M. which were very hard to counter. It was only with considerable difficulties that we induced him to accept your date.

I still feel that it would have been of great assistance if you had been able to come home when originally suggested; he has not taken it well and repeatedly harps back to this fact. Another advice I would give is when possible to send telegrams in your own capacity instead of coming from the Defence Council. The latter procedure annoys him and I think gives him the wrong impression that you are taking cover behind the cloak of the Defence Council! I can assure you that I do all I can from this end to make your path as easy as possible, but I am afraid that you do not always realize what a difficult matter this is when having to handle the Defence Committee, War Cabinet and a personality such as the P.M.!

I am longing for an opportunity to come out, and should love to be able to discuss many matters with you which are impossible to communicate by letter or telegram. Unfortunately, every time I have suggested it up to the present time the P.M. has refused to let me go. However, I intend to go on pressing until I succeed. . . .

This letter reached Auchinleck on June 3. On May 19 Ismay wrote to Auchinleck at length and in his own hand:

As luck would have it, yours of April 25 was in a bag that was inordinately delayed; and it only arrived two days ago. I was getting very fussed lest it should have gone astray altogether.

## AUCHINLECK

I understand your reasons for not having come home six or eight weeks ago; and, believe me, I sympathize with them, and with your difficulties more than I can say. But I still think that, on the whole, it would have been the right course. However, obviously the time is now long lost for any trip of that kind, either from you to us—or vice versa. And so, there are really only two things to say. The first is that you are more than ever in my thoughts—and indeed the thoughts of all of us. Whatever you yourself may feel about it—modest creature that you are—you ought to know that you enjoy the complete confidence of everyone that matters—as a clear-headed, resolute, and inspiring Commander. If things go well on your front, no one will have deserved it more than you. If they don't go well—which God forbid—there will at least be the consolation that no one else could have done any better. That is the first thing that I have to say: and the second is this. I am deeply distressed that you should even give a thought to the possibility of 'fading out quietly'. I love my country far too dearly—and I'm much too frightened of my own skin!—to contemplate the possibility of losing one of the very few really big men that we have to win this war for us. How I wish I could fly out to you, and try to drive these demons away. God knows I can understand your getting distressed by the apparent lack of confidence in your judgment: but, as I tried to explain in my last letter, these things are only 'apparent'—not real: they result from the futility of the written word, and the strain under which those who have the greatest responsibility are labouring. Anyhow, old friend, you are very very necessary to the Cause: so please put all thoughts of a serene evening of your days right out of court until we have won not only the war, but the peace.

The very best of fortune, and love from us both.

This letter did not reach Auchinleck until June 16, by which time a great deal had happened.

On May 20 he wrote at great length to Ritchie, analysing with remarkable prescience the various courses which he thought that Rommel might take in what he described as 'the coming struggle'.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

20 May 1942

I am sending you this by Corbett, as I feel that you should know how I think the enemy may attack you. I have had my ideas put on the enclosed maps in order to make them clearer.

Corbett is thoroughly in my mind and can explain any doubtful point to you.

Do not think I am trying to dictate to you in any way, but this coming struggle is going to be so vital that I feel that you must have the benefit of our combined consideration here, though I realize we can not be so conversant with the details of the problem as are you and your staff.

2. As you already know, I feel that there are two main courses open to the enemy:

(i) To envelop our southern flank, seizing or masking Bir Hacheim *en route*, and then driving on Tobruk. This would probably be accompanied by a strong diversion with plenty of artillery, dive-bombers and smoke against your northern flank, aided possibly by landings from small craft in rear of the Gazala inlet, with a view eventually to clearing the coast road to Tobruk.

(ii) To put in a very heavy attack on a narrow front with tanks, artillery, dive-bombers, smoke and lorried infantry against the centre of the main position, with the object of driving straight on Tobruk. This would probably be helped by a feint against Bir Hacheim in which the Italian tanks might well be used with the aim of drawing off the main body of your armour to the south, and so leaving the way open for the main thrust.

This course would also almost certainly include an attack from the sea round about Gazala for the same object as before.

3. I feel myself that the second course is the one he will adopt, and that it is certainly the most dangerous to us, as if it succeeds, it will cut our forces in half and probably result in the destruction of the northern part of them. We must of course be ready to deal with the enemy should he adopt the first course, and in either event you must of course be most careful not to commit your armoured striking force until you know beyond reasonable doubt where the main body of his armour is thrusting.

4. Now, as to the method I think he is likely to adopt to put the second course into effect, I believe he will try to put the main body of his armour through our front on both sides of the Gadd el Ahmar ridge, which, as you know, runs more or less east and west along the boundary between the 1st South African and 50th Divs. This attack will be supported by every kind of weapon, including especially dive-bombers and anti-tank artillery. It will be pushed relentlessly on a narrow front.

As we agreed the other day, it is likely that such an attack will break through in spite of our mine-fields. Let us assume that it does break through on a comparatively narrow front.

I think that then he will immediately put out defensive flanks, taking full advantage of the main coastal escarpment to the north,



and of the escarpment which runs along the Trigh Capuzzo to the south. If he can get his anti-tank and other artillery, protected by infantry, established on these escarpments, he will have established a corridor which may be difficult to cut, especially for your armour, if it is positioned as at present, somewhat far to the south.

Having secured his flank, he will drive in on Tobruk, assisted almost certainly by parachute attacks on the place itself and the troops guarding the entrances, and, possibly, also by landings from the sea which may be supported by naval bombardment. At the same time he may try to open the Gazala defile for the passage of M.T. and troops by landings from assault boats east of it.

As I have already said, this main attack will almost certainly be accompanied by a strong and resolute feint against Bir Hacheim, which will develop into a real attack if it has any initial success.

5. I know that you have taken and are taking numerous measures to meet an eventuality such as I have described; but I must tell you that, speaking from an office chair at a great distance from the battlefield, I wonder whether you should not put your armoured reserve a good deal farther to the north where it can hit the enemy immediately he emerges from his breakthrough, and before he can establish a defensive flank, which all our experience teaches us he will certainly try to do. I suggest that both your armoured divisions complete should be positioned astride the Trigh Capuzzo. It does not look from the map as if this would be too far north to meet the main attack, should it come round the southern flank, instead of against the centre as I anticipate. Your covering troops should give you good warning of any main enveloping movement on your left, even if you do not hear of it before it starts.

As always, the difficulty will be to decide which is the real attack and which the feint.

6. I feel that your reaction to my suggestion that you should put your armour more behind the centre of your position will be that your southern flank will be left bare of any mobile troops to delay and harass the enemy, and also of any armoured units to give immediate support to the Free French. I propose to send you at once the 3rd Indian Motor Bde, which, though not absolutely fully equipped, is fit for battle. I suggest you might like to keep them on your southern flank, and that this will obviate any need to leave either of the motor brigades of the two armoured divisions in this area. I consider it to be of the highest importance that you should not break up the organization of either of the armoured divisions. They have been trained to fight as divisions, I hope, and

## 'VERY ILL-CONTENT'

fight as divisions they should. Norrie must handle them as a corps commander, and thus be able to take advantage of the flexibility which the fact of having two formations gives him. Moreover, you will be getting the 1st Armoured Brigade before long, and it should join the 7th Armd Div., I feel, thus making both divisions similar.

As regards armoured support for the French, I suggest that, if you move your armoured divisions farther north, you might spare some infantry tanks for them. I am sending you up as soon as possible the 7th Royal Tanks, with one Valentine squadron of 4th Royal Tanks and two Matilda squadrons of its own, to increase your force of infantry tanks.

As to the rest of the infantry tanks, I suggest that, if possible, they should be placed so as to support the infantry in that part of the position which is likely to bear the brunt of the enemy attack. I admit that this may be uneconomical, as tending to immobilize them, but I feel that it is essential to give the infantry all possible support in order to encourage them to hang on. It is of the highest importance that they should hold on whatever happens. I will be glad if you will consider this also.

7. If you can stop the enemy short of Tobruk and then get at him in flank with your armour, and in rear with infantry and guns, I feel you may have the chance of scoring a decisive success. I think, therefore, that you should at once lay mine-fields across the corridor between the two escarpments to the west of Acroma, and cover these with guns. You will see from the sketch what I mean. I suggest also that you should consider mining the coastal corridor in more depth, so as to stop any break-through by that route, which, though it might not be serious, would be a serious nuisance, and divert effort from the main task of destroying *once and for all* the enemy's armour.

8. Finally, I suggest that you should fortify El Gubi and protect it with mines. I am sure you will feel much more comfortable when you have something there threatening any wide turning movement from the south against Tobruk or from the west against Sollum, unlikely as this may seem to be. I know you want to keep 5th Indian Division as compact and uncommitted as possible for use as in a mobile role, should opportunity offer, either under Gott or under yourself. I am absolutely certain that this is right. I am sending you, therefore, at once, the 11th Brigade of 4th Indian Division to replace 29th Infantry Brigade in Capuzzo, in case you still feel you need another brigade there as well as the 2nd Free French Brigade. If you don't, so much the

better; as you might then relieve the 9th Infantry Brigade of the 5th Indian Division in Tobruk, and so increase your mobile reserve. You could then use a brigade of the 5th Indian Division for El Gubi, if you feel so inclined.

The 11th Infantry Brigade is not mobile, and I do not want it committed forward of Sollum unless it is absolutely necessary to do so. I am bringing the whole of 10th Indian Division from Iraq and the leading brigade will be sent up to you as soon as it arrives in relief of 11th Infantry Brigade, which I shall then hope to get back here, as it is part of the garrison allotted to Cyprus.

9. I am also bringing from Syria the Guides Cavalry (armoured cars and wheeled carriers) which I will give you if you want them to replace a battle-worn unit, or for the pursuit which I hope to see you carrying out.

10. I suggest that you must reorganize your system of command for this battle. For a defensive battle I feel you must have your mobile reserve, that is your armoured force, freed from all static commitments and responsibilities. Your Army falls, as I see it, into two parts, one whose task it is to hold the fort, which is the Gazala-Tobruk-El Gubi-Bir Hacheim quadrilateral, and the other whose task it is to hit the enemy wherever he may thrust, and destroy him. I think Gott should be solely responsible for the first, and Norrie for the second. I would relieve the latter of all responsibility for Bir Hacheim at once.

11. I am sorry to have inflicted such a long letter on you, but, as I said before, so much hangs on this battle that I feel nothing must be left undone by anyone to help to win it.

As you know I have absolute confidence in you and your troops, and I am sure that if the enemy attacks, you will deal him a blow from which he may find it difficult, if not impossible, to recover. *This is the object.*<sup>1</sup>

Had the advice given in this letter been followed, events might have taken a radically different course. It was not, it must be admitted, an operational instruction, but only advice. Seen in its historical and biographical perspective, it can only be regarded as a document of crucial importance, to which it will be necessary to refer, in some detail, later in this narrative.

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this letter were inserted as the result of representations made to the C.G.S. (Gen. Corbett) by the newly-arrived D.C.G.S., Gen. Dorman-Smith, who pointed out that Rommel had intended to capture Tobruk in November 1941, and would probably have succeeded with the means at his disposal.

'VERY ILL-CONTENT'

*General Rommel to Frau Rommel*

*26 May 1942*

By the time you get this letter you will have long ago heard about events here. We're launching a decisive attack today. It will be hard, but I have full confidence that my army will win it. . . .

In the end, which came just two months later, that confidence was proved to have been misplaced.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Operation 'Venezia'

EIGHTH ARMY's defensive positions, at the beginning of the last week of May 1942 stretched southwards across the desert from Ain el Gazala on the Mediterranean coast to the oasis of Bir Hacheim. They were a series of 'boxes' or strongholds, which were protected by a wide belt of mine-fields stretching almost the whole extent of of the line. It is clear that the British were considerably better informed about the Axis dispositions than Rommel was about Ritchie's. As in the last days before the launching of 'Crusader', Eighth Army were perfectly aware of Rommel's intention to open an attack; but as in November, so now in May the actual date alone was not known. But it is a quite erroneous conception that either Ritchie or Auchinleck was caught unprepared. However, before the battle began Ritchie's final dispositions were by no means in keeping with Auchinleck's advice in his letter of May 20.

These dispositions must be carefully considered. Eighth Army consisted now, as in the previous November, of two Corps, 13th and 30th. Though both had changed considerably in character and composition, 13th Corps was still primarily the 'infantry' corps, 30th primarily the 'armoured'. Some famous and familiar veteran divisions were no longer in the desert; there were no Australians and no New Zealanders, but two South African divisions; 4th Indian Division were in Cyprus, 7th Armoured had been in the desert a long time and had survived many vicissitudes. 1st Armoured had been refashioned and retrained after its catastrophe in January. 13th Corps, commanded by Gott, consisted of the 50th Infantry Division (Major-General W. H. C. Ramsden), the 1st South African Division (Major-General D. H. Pienaar), the 2nd South African Division (Major-General D. Klopper), the 1st Army Tank Brigade (Brigadier H. R. B. Watkins), and the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier B. C. Fletcher).

The 1st South African Division held the front from the coast west of the Gazala inlet to Alem Hamza; two brigades of the 50th Division carried the line eastwards from the Alem Hamza salient to

## OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

the point where it again turned southwards; its third brigade held the detached strong-point of Sidi Muftah. The 1st Army Tank Brigade (heavy tanks) was divided between these two infantry divisions in a supporting task. The 2nd South African Division occupied the western part of the Tobruk defences and some small strong-points below the escarpment towards Gazala. The 9th Indian Infantry Brigade held the eastern half of the Tobruk perimeter. It must be stressed at this point that these were in no sense the old, elaborate defence works of the period of the siege in the previous autumn; and they were not intended to be held as such.

30th Corps, commanded by Norrie, consisted of the bulk of Eighth Army's armour: the 1st Armoured Division (with Lumsden, recovered from his wounds, back in command); the 201st (Guards) Motor Brigade (Brigadier J. C. O. Marriott); the 7th Armoured Division (Major-General F. W. Messervy); the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade Group (Brigadier A. E. Filose); the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier D. Reid); and the 1st Free French Brigade Group (Brigadier-General J. P. F. Koenig).

This corps controlled the southern flank, with its two armoured divisions paired in rear, but dispersed, not concentrated. The 1st Armoured Division was astride and just south of the Trigh Capuzzo, between Knightsbridge and El Adem. The 7th Armoured Division was some ten miles farther south, behind Bir Hacheim, in order to cover the exposed desert flank. The 1st Free French Brigade<sup>1</sup> holding Bir Hacheim, and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, some miles to the south-east of it, were both under the operational control of 7th Armoured Division.

Rommel's plans—a complete copy of which fell into British hands at an early stage in the battle—were as follows: the Afrika Korps and the 90th Light Division Battle Group were to concentrate north of Segnali on the evening of May 26. On May 27, after a night advance, the Ariete Armoured Division was to capture Bir Hacheim, while the Trieste Motorized Division was to make a gap in the mine-field south of the Sidi Muftah strong-point, where it was crossed by the Trigh el Abd. Simultaneously the Afrika Korps was to form up south of Bir Hacheim, with 21st Panzer Division (less one battalion of tanks) on the left, the 15th Panzer Division in the centre and the 90th Light Battle Group on the right. These formations were then to

<sup>1</sup> The importance of the presence of these 5,500 Frenchmen in this battle must be noted. It was just two years since Auchinleck, at Narvik, had had under his command General Béthouart and his gallant detachment; and this was indeed the first time since 1940 that Frenchmen had been in combat with the Germans.

advance northwards and, after destroying Ritchie's armoured forces, were to reach Acroma and El Adem before nightfall. Motorized columns were to seize Sidi Rzegh and El Duda. On May 28 the three armoured divisions were to attack British positions between Gazala and Alem Hamza from the east, while four Italian infantry divisions stiffened by two regiments of the 90th Light Division and one tank battalion of the 21st Panzer Division were to attack the same positions from the west. Tobruk was to be captured during the two subsequent days.<sup>1</sup>

This plan, as the South African Official History has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> bore a singular resemblance to 'Crusader' in reverse, and had been anticipated quite clearly by Auchinleck in his letter to Ritchie on May 20. Its chief fault—which got Rommel into serious trouble in the initial phase of the battle—was that it was founded on faulty intelligence and an over-confident, indeed an arrogant, contempt for the fighting quality of the opponents it was intended to overwhelm.

I never liked this plan, [said General Bayerlein] and, as Chief of Staff of the Afrika Korps, I told Rommel so continually. It seemed to me altogether too risky to go on without first knocking out Bir Hacheim. Six weeks before he asked me, 'What would you do with your armour if you were General Ritchie?' I told him that I would keep it well away to the eastward, somewhere about El Adem, refuse battle at first and then strike at our flank when we were inside the Gazala position. 'You're crazy,' he said, 'they'll never do that!' . . .<sup>3</sup>

As often before, Rommel was set upon a swift and total victory, which he certainly was not granted.

On the British side there was excellent intelligence, and there was a clear appraisal of what Rommel's intentions were likely to be. A defensive battle could have been fought—and ought to have been fought, if Auchinleck's advice had been followed—which would have lured Rommel to fight on ground of Ritchie's choosing and not of his own, and thus to be driven to certain defeat. This is what Auchinleck had envisaged. The fault lay in the misapplication of his advice, so that the Eighth Army's two armoured divisions, instead of being concentrated astride the Trigh Capuzzo, ready to deliver a counter-

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 123. Bayerlein's analysis was much better than Rommel's. This was exactly what Auchinleck counselled Ritchie to do.

## OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

stroke against the Axis armour, once this was clearly committed in one direction or another, were widely dispersed. This was a tactical blunder by Eighth Army, which was to lead to dislocation and to the piecemeal destruction of British armour under the pressure of Rommel's quicker action. That pressure was precisely what Auchinleck had foreseen, and he had striven to take precautions against it.

When it became clear that Ritchie had not acted in accordance with his advice, ought Auchinleck to have relieved him of his command? Ought he to have put upon Ritchie a pressure like that which he himself had borne so long from the Prime Minister? The first would have been a prudent step, but was not a practical possibility at that moment; and he had firmly rejected Churchill's suggestion that he should assume personal command. The second was simply not in character. He trusted his subordinates, and except in the case of open disobedience (which Ritchie's action certainly was not), he did not abandon that trust when they disagreed with him.

Wisdom after the event is the privilege and the peril of the historian. It ought however to have become apparent, in the course of the long, painful controversy which has been recorded in the previous chapter, that the dispositions of Eighth Army had been adversely affected by the difference between Auchinleck's desire to fight a defensive battle and the insistence, on the part of the Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff, that he must launch an offensive. These dispositions were at the end, therefore—with that irony about them which was seldom absent from the Desert campaigns—better designed, as has been pointed out with his customary acuteness by Liddell Hart, to form a springboard for an offensive than to meet an attack by the enemy.<sup>1</sup> The blame for this confusion, which was strategic rather than tactical, must be shared between the Prime Minister and the Chiefs of Staff on one side, for forcing a Commander-in-Chief to act against his own judgment, and Auchinleck on the other, for bowing to their decision. But that the strategic confusion contributed towards the tactical misunderstanding and ineptness is a factor which ought not to be ignored.

Yet flawed as Eighth Army's plan was, it very nearly succeeded in the first stage of Rommel's offensive. It clearly requires more daring and more military skill to fight and win a defensive than an offensive battle. In May, Eighth Army, forestalled in the attack which Churchill had ordered, very nearly succeeded in giving him what was intended to be the end-product of that attack, the total

<sup>1</sup> *The Tanks*, Vol. II, p. 152.



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defeat of the Axis forces in Africa. The story of the next two months is of the grim consequences of that near-miss.

\* \* \*

General Corbett, the new C.G.S., had taken Auchinleck's letter of May 20 to Ritchie at Eighth Army H.Q., and had stayed there for a couple of days. A few hours later Auchinleck sent another note up by the daily liaison officer.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

20 May 1942

... The enemy is in a hurry, and his attack may come any day now I feel. As you know from my other letter, I am hastening reinforcements to you with all my might! I feel that if you can co-ordinate what you have got and are going to have into one big blow against the enemy, we should give him Hell! I have full confidence in your ability to do this!

It is dangerous to prophesy, but I do not see how his airborne and seaborne attacks can be on a very big scale. I have no doubt that they will be vigorous, clever and dangerous. I agree about Tobruk being the most likely objective, but you are right not to neglect the security of objectives farther in rear, and I am trying to help you in this by sending up everything in the way of troops I can lay my hands on! Hope you can feed them all!!

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

23 May 1942

I hope that Corbett's visit here has eased your mind in regard to the positioning of the armour and the roles that have been allotted to them. I am extremely sorry that you should have been exercised in your mind about this on account of the fact that the exact positioning had not been accurately given. You have so many other things than this to worry about. The mistake was, I feel, due to McCreery being given some wrong information from the map board here.

### *2. Appreciation*

All the indications are, I think, that we may expect him to attack very shortly. Ground observation, confirmed by air photography yesterday, shows that three 'F' lighters were in Bomba. They would not be there for supply purposes; they would not be sent there for practising seaborne operations; they would not be sent there long before they were needed to be used. All these are pointers to seaborne operations starting fairly soon. On the other hand they were not loaded, which is strange were they

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going to carry tanks, for these I think they would probably load at Derna and only move them forward to Bomba at the last possible moment. They may of course be a 'plant'!

There is more activity on the German 'Y' this morning though little ground activity yet reported, and I think this may possibly portend a movement forward of the 21st Panzer Div. which I myself feel is probably still somewhere south of Tmimi. It is difficult to forecast where his main thrust will come; it will certainly be combined with one or more diversionary efforts and undoubtedly with a distracting and disrupting operation by sea and air.

His recent very considerable increase in transport, and the fact that the rate of discharge at Benghazi port will have enabled him materially to economize in road transport between Tripoli and that place, will give him a great circuit of action for his striking force. I still feel that if his maintenance makes this possible he will try to go round our southern flank. In any case there will be a diversion there and this will probably be the Italian Mobile Corps. There are certainly indications of an interest on his part in the Bregheisc-Alem Hamza ridge and the main thrust may, of course, come here. But it will be a difficult and costly operation for him as our mine-fields are strong and our positions there well sited, well supported with artillery and well dug-in. Anyhow whatever course he may adopt, our main strength is the counter with our armour to destroy him. We are ready for this . . . the ground carefully studied, and I feel confident that our armed forces are prepared to operate either to the south or to the north-west.

The sea-landing side has been buttoned up. Any landing, other than on a major scale starting from Europe, must, I think, be limited to the portion of the coastline between Tobruk inclusive and Gazala. There may be small disruptive parties elsewhere as far to the east as my rear boundary. We have an adequate watching system with suitable communications and this has been interwoven with the existing R.A.F. and A.A. warning systems. The difficulty of course is that we cannot cover with fire permanently every possible beach at which he might land, but I think our system will give us the earliest possible warning of where a landing takes place. I have arranged with 'Mary' that his job will be to put down the highest possible scale of air attack on any landing to delay and disrupt it, while I move up the troops to deal with the situation. My calculations at present are that the scale of attack is unlikely to be greater than a large-sized bn gp with full supporting arms accompanied by up to fifty tanks. No doubt sea bombardment as a side issue.

3. *The 'Arena'*

I spent a long day yesterday with Willoughby Norrie studying the ground and the positioning of troops for the battle there, after a conference with Strafer to co-ordinate the action of his various armoured columns going into this battle. I was to have done this the day before, but had to postpone it on account of Corbett's visit. I feel quite satisfied that an enemy armoured force that gets into this 'arena' area opens itself to fighting at a great disadvantage and should offer us every chance of destroying it utterly. . . .

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

23 May 1942

. . . I feel now that I am pretty well in your mind for the time being.

I am quite happy about the positioning of the armoured divisions, and I am glad we were thinking on the same lines; this is always comforting!

I hope 3rd Indian Motor Brigade will prove adequate for the job you are giving them. . . .

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

25 May 1942

. . . I am so pleased to feel that you are happy about the positioning of the armour. I was sure that you would be once you were in possession of the correct facts. Since I last wrote we have moved our Headquarters some six or seven miles farther east to a position about a mile north of the main road.

The advance party of the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade has arrived up and gone forward to report to 30th Corps. I am not quite sure how soon they will be able to take over completely to relieve 7th Motor Brigade on the southern portion of the front as they are deficient of certain items, the chief amongst which are wireless sets. However, we will get on with this matter as soon as this is possible. . . .

Personally I am satisfied that we can fight in this position now. I do not for one moment suggest that it could not be improved, for this it certainly can be and strengthened too, but I would say that it is fightable as it stands today. But I would like more mines to replace those used forward. . . .

There is not much to report from the front this last twenty-four hours. We took a prisoner from Asida belonging to H.Q. of 90th Lt Div. He is lying a lot I believe. But yet there are some indications that something more has been moved down there, though no signs yet of large numbers of tanks. These, I believe, are still mostly behind the Breghisc-Segnali gap. . . .

## OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

26 May 1942

I am most grateful to you for the information about your defences and dispositions in what you call the 'Arena'. It is a great help to have these accurately shown on my map in the War Room, as I can then follow your plans, and also the battle should it ever take place in this area. . . .

I have never discarded the possibility of the enemy making his main thrust round the southern flank, and it would be most dangerous to make up one's mind that he must attack in one place only. Nevertheless, my opinion, for what it is worth, is that the great majority of the indications point to a very heavy attack on a narrow front on the northern sector of your front, probably against the front of the 1st South African Bde. If this attack does materialize, it will, I feel certain, be supported by the largest possible concentration of artillery and dive-bombers, and the effect of this bombardment may be such as to crush the defence, temporarily at any rate.

This was Rommel's plan for attacking Tobruk, as you may remember. A narrow thrust, and then a fanning out along a natural obstacle to form a defensive flank, while the spearhead continued to go on. I hope that in the break-through he may lose heavily in tanks and men, and thus offer a weakened force for your armoured divisions to hit and destroy. It is possible, however, that the weight of the supporting fire may be so great as to prevent the defending infantry and artillery from taking any serious toll of his tanks.

Have you considered the desirability of altering the infantry and artillery dispositions in this sector, I wonder? I expect they have the usual alternative positions, but I was thinking of a more drastic alteration than that, even amounting to an increase of depth in the position by withdrawing troops from the forward areas, and so reducing the effect of his initial bombardment. I feel this merits close examination, which of course I am not competent to give it at this distance.

Once again, at the risk of being tiresome, I would like to stress the absolute necessity for preventing him establishing defensive flanks if he does try to attack in the way I have suggested. Don't think I am becoming a monomaniac on this subject! I do feel, however, that if he does try this method, he will put all his resources into it, as it depends for success on speed, which can only be made possible by brute force. Do not forget that he does not know that we know as much as we do, nor can he yet have found out how much the measures taken recently by you have

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strengthened your position generally. He may yet deliver himself into your hands by attacking where we are stronger than he thinks. I hope he does!

If he comes by the south, time should be on your side, and you ought to get ample warning from your motorized troops, armoured cars and the air. An offensive on this flank will very soon expose his supply lines to your attack, and should give you the chance of having at his weak infantry, once he has committed his armour beyond Bir Hacheim. Do you agree with this?

We are agreed, I know, that the most difficult thing to decide will be when to change from the defensive to the offensive. I feel the time will surely come when this decision has to be made, and when it is made everyone must spring forward to the attack, and seek out the enemy wherever he is, and give him no peace till he is destroyed. I know you have impressed this on all commanders, but it cannot be said too often, so please keep on saying it! We are apt to be slow in the uptake, and may lose precious chances thereby, unless everyone is imbued with the idea of swift and daring action when you give the word. . . .

Ritchie was convinced that he had acted upon Auchinleck's advice about the position of his armoured forces. Auchinleck believed that he had. This genuine misunderstanding had very serious consequences.

At 14.00 hours on May 26, after a preliminary bombardment, the Italian XXIst Corps—in the main an artillery formation—launched a frontal attack on the 1st South African Division near Gazala. Rommel hoped that Ritchie would be deceived into expecting the main Axis thrust at this point, and bring his armour up to meet it. He therefore attached one panzer regiment of the Afrika Korps and one of the Italian XXth Corps to each of the assault formations: but they were ordered to return to their parent formations in the evening. These parent formations, with the 90th Light Division, were Rommel's main striking group. They gathered during the afternoon in their concentration area, east of Segnali. It was a hot, gusty day with whirling sand-storms and poor visibility—the kind of day to which Eighth Army applied a rude, soldierly epithet. British reconnaissance aircraft could make out little of what was going on in the haze; but Eighth Army's armoured car screen—three South African regiments, the King's Dragoon Guards and the 12th Lancers—reported 'some southward movement', without being able to gauge the numbers involved. These were, in fact, impressive—about ten thousand vehicles in all.

## OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

In the evening, when the haze lifted, Rommel sent some of them off northwards to the Gazala front, to be observed—so he intended—by the British pre-dusk air reconnaissance; they were ordered, as soon as they had played this trick, to turn and race back at top speed to the assembly area.

Rommel was in great fettle, and made no attempt to conceal his excitement or his impatience. He was not a man given to exhibitionist gestures, but perhaps out of courtesy to his Italian comrades-in-arms he issued a flamboyant Order of the Day:

The Armoured Army of Africa, in the course of great operations, moves today to a decisive attack against the British mobile forces in Libya. Remembering the victorious deeds of the months of January and February, we shall attack and discomfort the enemy wherever he presents his arms. For this purpose a force of superior numbers has been made ready and equipped with perfected armament and a powerful air force to give support to the fight. The high quality and warlike ardour of the Italian and German soldiers combined with the superiority of our arms guarantee you victory. I expect every man at his post will remain faithful to the high traditions of his own country and his own army, will do his duty and give himself wholly to the inviolable alliance of our arms. Long live His Majesty the King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia! Long live the Duce of the Roman Empire! Long live the Führer of Great Germany!

(Signed) Supreme Commander Colonel-General Rommel.<sup>1</sup>

At 20.30 hours the Colonel-General ordered Operation 'Venezia', and the striking Force moved off eastwards. Rommel recorded: 'My staff and I, in our place in the Afrika Korps's column, drove through the moonlit night towards the great armoured battle.'<sup>2</sup> The tanks of his escort, however, found it impossible to keep up with the furious pace which Rommel set. Away over in the south-east occasional flashes of light showed where the wheeling-point of Bir Hacheim was being marked by the flares of the Luftwaffe. General Messervy, the Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, noticed them, and got his first inkling of what was afoot.

The Afrika Korps were convinced that their move was hidden from their opponents. They were wrong, as the South African Official History records. The South African armoured cars were

<sup>1</sup> A copy of the Italian version fell into British hands early in the battle; a translation of this is in the Auchinleck papers.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 206.

continually in contact from the afternoon of the 26th until dawn on the following day, reporting back at half-hour intervals to 7th Motor Brigade, which sent to 7th Armoured Division no fewer than thirteen situation reports during the hours of darkness.

Headquarters of the 4th South African armoured cars kept up a fascinating running commentary of the enemy movements. The darkness and the stillness gave an eerie feeling of apprehension.<sup>1</sup>

It was all the more extraordinary, therefore, that Rommel's initial assault was ominously successful. At sunrise his two German panzer divisions and the 90th Light roared in amongst the brigades of 7th Armoured Division 'as they lay scattered across the desert east of Bir Hacheim, making preparations for a leisurely move'.<sup>2</sup>

The Axis armour swept over 7th Motor Brigade, inflicted severe casualties on the 4th Armoured Brigade, and surprised and overran the Headquarters of 7th Armoured Division. Messervy threw away his red hat, removed his badges of rank, and pretended to be a private soldier—a batman prematurely greyed. He escaped that evening, but the capture of his Headquarters threw a large part of the British defence scheme out of gear. 30th Corps had no idea of what had happened until the evening, and it was not until 09.30 hours on May 28 that Eighth Army H.Q. heard of it and refused to believe what they heard.

The Ariete Division hit the newly arrived 3rd Indian Motor Brigade in its defensive 'box' at 6.30 a.m. The brigade made a most gallant fight, which lasted some three hours. Eleven officers and more than two hundred other ranks were killed, some thirty officers and nearly a thousand other ranks were taken prisoner, but before the engagement ended they had put out of action fifty-two enemy tanks, many of them permanently.

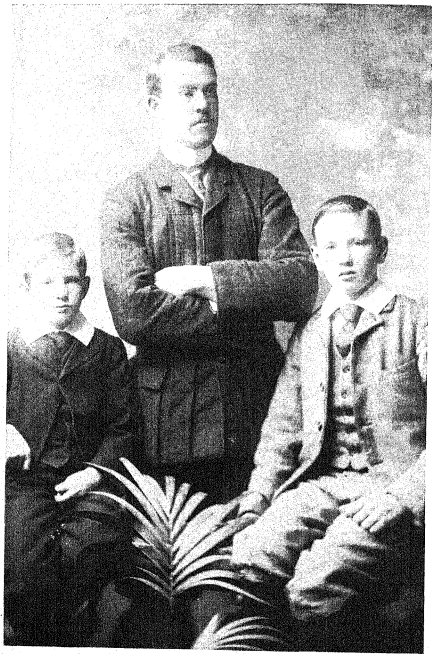
When 15th Panzer struck 4th Armoured Brigade, its units were just forming up to move into their battle positions. 8th Hussars were destroyed as a fighting unit, but 3rd Royal Tank Regiment—now equipped with the new American Grant tanks—engaged the enemy fiercely. The Grants came as a shock to Rommel; the panzers found themselves under heavy fire from British tanks at too long a range for them to be able to hit back. The Axis losses were heavy; 15th Panzer's advance, halted for some time, was only resumed when they brought up three batteries of eighty-eight-millimetre guns.

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.



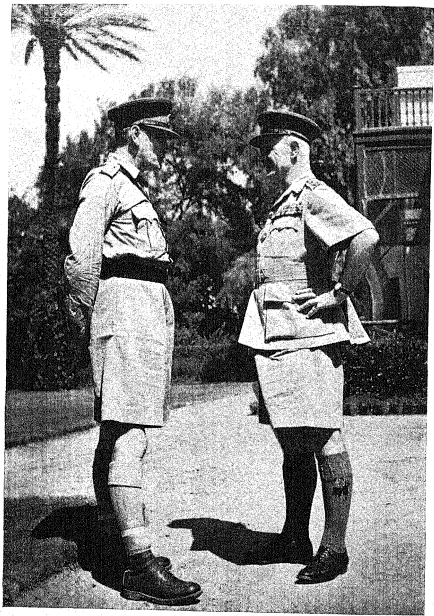




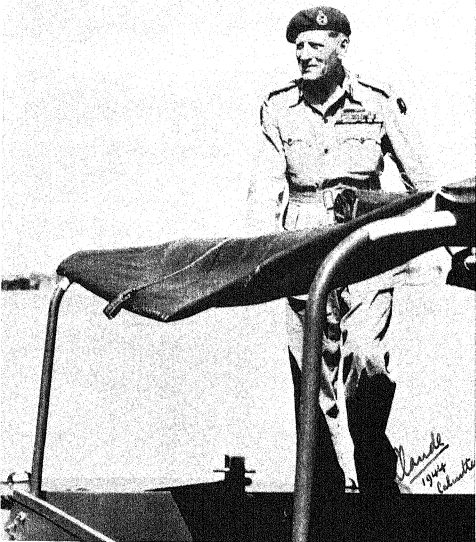
*Right: Claude Auchinleck (aged thirteen), left: his younger brother,  
Armen Leslie Auchinleck*



Major (Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel) C. J. Auchinleck, D.S.O., 1921



General Auchinleck and General Wavell. Cairo, 1941



The Chief. India, 1944



General Sir Claude Auchinleck, 1945, by James Gunn.  
This portrait now hangs in the Great Hall at Wellington  
*By permission of the Governors of Wellington College*



Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, 1959, by Edward Seago  
*By permission of the United Service Club*



Farewell to India

## OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

Rommel in his diary described this action as 'a surprise, not to our advantage'.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, 90th Light Division, which possessed a number of vehicles fitted with airscrews to create a cloud of dust, took a wide sweep through the desert. By 10.00 hours they had reached the crossroads at El Adem and captured a number of dumps established by 30th Corps.<sup>2</sup> General Norrie and his Corps Headquarters went into the El Adem 'box', in which General Gott and his Corps Headquarters were already established.

By midday, therefore, it looked as if Rommel was well on the way to bringing off his ambitious and audacious *coup*. In the words of the South African Official History: 'The fantastic time-table of the Panzer Army Operation Order seemed to be working out according to plan.'<sup>3</sup>

Rommel, believing that he had destroyed the bulk of the British armour, left the Afrika Korps and set off to join 90th Light Division at El Adem; but 2nd Armoured Brigade, which also had Grants, attacked his column, and he was forced to turn back. Contact between 90th Light and the Afrika Korps was broken. Rommel turned to fight his way back to his panzer divisions, and found himself confronted by a British battery, heading northwards to the Tobruk-Gazala area. Before the gunners could get into action Rommel and his column charged them and overran them.

His own account of the rest of that day was as vivid as it was objective:

In the afternoon, heavy tank fighting flared up some five miles north-east of Bir el Harmat, south of the Trigh Capuzzo. 1st Armoured Division joined in the battle, its powerful armoured units attacking mainly from the north-east. The British armour, under heavy artillery cover, poured their fire into the columns and panzer units of the Afrika Korps, which were visible for miles. Fire and black smoke welled up from lorries and tanks, and our attack came to a standstill. Again my divisions suffered extremely serious tank losses. Many of our columns broke into confusion and fled away to the south-west, out of the British artillery fire. The Afrika Korps, while maintaining its defence to the east, fought its way step by step to the north. The battle raged on in

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> One regimental historian dolefully recorded that on either May 27 or 28 these vandals destroyed a dump containing the whole N.A.A.F.I. supply of whisky.

<sup>3</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 25.



the camelthorn-studded plain until nightfall, by which time the mass of the Afrika Korps had thrust through to a point some eight miles south and south-west of Acroma. Unfortunately, most of the lorry columns had been parted from the panzer divisions and part of the infantry had also been unable to follow. Contact had been broken within my staff. Lieutenant-Colonel Westphal, my Ia, had pushed on with a number of signals lorries to the Afrika Korps, whereas I myself, with the rest of the army staff, was located at nightfall about two miles north-east of Bir el Harmat.

Looking back on the first day's fighting, it was clear that our plan to overrun the British forces behind the Gazala line had not succeeded. The advance to the coast had also failed and we had thus been unable to cut off the 50th British and 1st South African Divisions from the rest of the Eighth Army. The principal cause was our underestimate of the strength of the British armoured divisions. The advent of the new American tank had torn great holes in our ranks. Our entire force now stood in heavy and destructive combat with a superior enemy.

Certainly we had seriously mauled the brigades which the British had thrown against us south-east of Bir el Harmat. The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade had suffered such heavy losses that it was unable to make any further appearance during the whole of the battle. It was also to be a long time before the 7th Armoured Division recovered from the blows it had been dealt that day.

But I will not deny that I was seriously worried that evening. Our heavy tank losses were no good beginning to the battle (far more than a third of the German tanks had been lost in this one day). The 90th Light Division under General Kleeman had become separated from the Afrika Korps and was now in a very dangerous position. British motorized groups were streaming through the open gap and hunting down the transport columns which had lost touch with the main body. And on these columns the life of my army depended.

However, in spite of the precarious situation and the difficult problems with which it faced us, I looked forward that evening full of hope to what the battle might bring. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Rommel's hope could have been shattered and his army destroyed, had the British reaction been instantaneous and vigorous. But that hope was founded on a grimly accurate assessment of the tactical tardiness and myopia of Eighth Army. Ritchie, as Rommel perceived, had thrown his armour into the battle piecemeal and had

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 207-8.

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given him the chance of engaging the British units on each separate occasion with just about enough of his own tanks. This dispersal of the British armoured brigades seemed to Rommel 'incomprehensible'. His opponents' principal aim, he believed (in full agreement with Auchinleck), ought to have been to bring all the armour they had into action at one and the same time.

The happenings of May 28 did nothing to improve Rommel's position. He decided on the previous evening to persevere with his northward thrust, concentrating all his available forces to that end. He ordered 90th Light Division, which was under severe pressure near El Adem, to disengage and move westwards to join Afrika Korps. When dawn came the Colonel-General was cut off from the various parts of his Panzer Army. 90th Light could not obey its orders because it was engaged by 4th Armoured Brigade—Rommel somewhat over-estimated their numbers at a hundred—and repeatedly attacked by R.A.F. bombers. To enable it to meet further attacks, said Rommel, the division 'was forced to form a hedgehog some six miles east of Bir el Harmat'.<sup>1</sup>

Things became no less serious for Afrika Korps. 21st Panzer Division, in its northward move, reached a point eight miles west of Acroma, and was intermittently under attack from 1st Armoured Division on its eastern flank. The 15th Panzer Division stayed on the Rigel ridge near Knightsbridge, having almost run out of ammunition.

On the afternoon of the 28th Rommel became, as he himself admitted, 'uneasy'. The recklessness of his plan was now, or ought to have been, bleakly apparent. His Panzer Army had now been badly dispersed. His fighting units and his supply echelons were widely separated. His Headquarters staff were divided; Colonel Westphal and some wireless links were with the Afrika Korps, and Rommel himself, his aides and a few other officers, were hemmed in some three kilometres south-east of the badly battered 90th Light. His whole striking force 'was marooned between the Gazala mine-fields and El Adem, surrounded by hostile forces, running desperately short of supplies, with no means of replenishment save the long and precarious route round a hostile Bir Hacheim'.<sup>2</sup>

During that evening a South African column captured a German supply group. The *Oberleutnant* in command burst into tears and said, 'Africa is lost!'

Rommel was not in such a state as this junior officer, but his anxiety was real, deep and justified. Late in the evening he himself

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 27.

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formed up as big a supply column as he could muster to take up to Afrika Korps as soon as possible on the following morning. 'In view of the small amount of cover we could expect to find,' he wrote afterwards, 'this journey through a district dominated by enemy formations promised to be a decidedly risky affair.'

Outwardly composed and resolute as ever, Rommel that night was a profoundly worried man. Now was the time for Ritchie to strike, and strike hard with all the strength he had.

\* \* \*

That evening in Cairo Auchinleck had a conference in his War Room. The tail-end of the desert khamsin had hit Cairo, and the night was hot and airless. Several of the Staff officers present were new to their tasks: Corbett, de Guingand and Dorman-Smith. The last of these three officers, after having been for nearly two years Commandant of the Staff School at Haifa, had then been selected to preside over an all-Service senior commanders' war course, which it was hoped to establish in South Africa, and had visited the Union to make the preparatory arrangements. Shortage of transport aircraft however, it had been ruled by the C.I.G.S., precluded the establishment of the course in South Africa;<sup>1</sup> and Dorman-Smith returned to Cairo, to find himself offered the alternatives of going to a major-general's appointment on Wavell's staff in India or of remaining in Cairo as D.C.G.S. He took the latter.

Dorman-Smith's forceful and original mind had matured in the years since he and Auchinleck had walked round Summer Hill in Simla in the early mornings of an Indian summer. He did not suffer fools gladly, and those with slower minds than his, and a less sharp and agile turn of phrase, were awed and sometimes angered by him and apt to describe him as 'unorthodox'. His quickness and his unorthodoxy, which he himself strenuously denied, were very valuable to the Commander-in-Chief at this time. His part in the dramatic and complex events of the next two months was considerable, and was the subject of misunderstanding and of controversy.

The results of that conference on the evening of May 28 were embodied in a letter and an appreciation; Auchinleck signed the letter at 23.30 hours that night.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

*28 May 1942*

We have been thinking hard over the possibility of your changing

<sup>1</sup> It was set up on a smaller scale near Sarafand in Palestine.

## OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

over to the offensive immediately you have cracked the enemy armour, which you now seem to have got where you always wanted it. Well done you!

I enclose the result of our thinking, for what it may be worth.

I have specified certain formations for certain tasks, but only in order to prove to myself that the troops needed would be available, and not with the slightest intention of laying down the law about them.

I feel we must be ready to move at once, whichever way the cat jumps. . . .

The enclosure read:

### *Enemy Resources*

As a result Acroma battle, enemy original armoured attacking force practically wiped out.

Enemy left with, say:

100 Italian tanks—in arena, and some escaped.

50–60 German tanks—Temrad area.

Four Italian divisions of about 4–5,000 men (strength May 27) and 20 fd guns and 15 A/Tk guns each.

Part of 90th German Light Division, say 3 bns and 12 fd guns.

### *Our Resources*

1st Armd Bde Gp complete	150 tanks
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Residue 1st and 7th Armd Divs.	100 tanks
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Residue 1st Army Tk Bde	50 tanks
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32nd Army Tank Bde	75 tanks
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*Total:* 250 medium and 125 heavy tanks

375 British tanks against 250 German and Italian tanks.

Three Infantry Divisions of about 52,000 men and 216 fd guns holding our positions Gazala–Tobruk–Bir Hacheim.

5th and 10th Ind. Divs. mobile and available for offensive, plus possibly greater part 3rd Ind. Motor Bde Gp as well as two motor brigade groups of 1st and 7th Armd Divs.

If necessary, two infantry brigade groups (not fully mobile) of 4th Ind. Div. can also be made available to hold defensive positions and so release mobile infantry for the offensive.

### *Object*

Object is to destroy the enemy army as soon as possible, so as to prevent it slipping away to the west.

### *Method*

Enemy's south flank is as always in this theatre, his vital point. Therefore, assuming that we can now count on reasonable

superiority in tanks and greater superiority in infantry, we should go straight for it.

Our immediate objective should be, therefore, Segnali.

To pin the enemy farther to the north, we should put in a secondary attack, preferably with 50th Div. and heavy tanks against Temrad, while 1st S.A. Div. demonstrates against enemy extreme left but does not push home attack, as we *want* enemy to stay in this area.

Further to encircle the enemy, all available light mobile forces should strike hard at Mechili and even Benghazi, while L.R.D.G. and 'Commandos' must harass enemy L. of C. everywhere possible.

The main air targets should be enemy communications forward of, and including Benghazi, and his aerodromes in the same area. . . .

At dawn the following morning Dorman-Smith, taking this letter with him, flew up to Eighth Army H.Q. at Gambut. He found an atmosphere of relief and optimism; Ritchie himself was forward with the corps commanders planning a counter-stroke. But this was the day not for planning, but for being in the full onrush of a counter-stroke. May 29 was crucial; and as every hour of it passed, things grew better for Rommel. He, too, was off in the dawn, leading the supply columns through the gap which he had observed on the previous evening. They got through unscathed and came into the opening phase of a fierce battle. 2nd Armoured Brigade, heading westwards from Knightsbridge, had been engaged, from 08.00 hours onwards, by 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, which were striking south from the Rigel area where they had leaguered the night before. Rommel's arrival on the scene had two effects: first, the practical one that he brought the petrol and the ammunition of which Afrika Korps were in serious need; second, he reasserted his own powers of personal leadership, in direct and constant control of the battle. By midday fighting was intense. Ariete joined in from the south, and 2nd Armoured Brigade were fighting on three fronts. 22nd Armoured Brigade were diverted from an attack on Bir el Harmat to assist. Casualties on both sides were severe, and on the Axis side the ammunition which Rommel himself had brought up was running low. The Colonel-General set up his command post and surveyed his situation. It was disagreeable, but a good deal better than it had been twenty-four hours earlier.

At 17.00 hours, with a hot, dry wind from the south swirling up into a sand-storm, fighting ended for the day. It will be recalled that

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Rommel's original plan called for a frontal attack by the infantry formations known as Group Cruewell (which were in fact the Italian Xth and XXIst Corps, but under Cruewell's command), on the main Gazala defence positions. This had so far made little headway, but with the Axis armour in its intensely dangerous situation to the east of the British mine-fields, Group Cruewell obviously assumed considerable importance. During May 29 Cruewell set off in his Storch aircraft to visit the Xth Corps: he was shot down over the 'box' held by 150th Infantry Brigade and taken prisoner. When realization of this catastrophe dawned, the senior officer at Group Cruewell's Headquarters was Major von Mellenthin, but it happened that Field-Marshal Kesselring had just arrived to find out how the battle was going. Von Mellenthin asked him to take command of the Group until Rommel could make other arrangements. Kesselring was amused, but observed that as a Field-Marshal he could hardly take orders from Colonel-General Rommel. The Major was insistent; his argument that 'it would not suit us to have an Italian general in command of Group Cruewell at such a juncture', clinched it.<sup>1</sup> Kesselring took over Group Cruewell for a few days.

Cruewell was not the only casualty among Axis senior commanders that day. General von Vaerst, commander of the 15th Panzer Division, was wounded and taken off the battlefield. Even more serious than the casualties was the supply situation. The only line of supply open to Rommel, the long detour to the south past Bir Hacheim, was virtually cut by British motorized units. In the 'arena' itself, 2nd, 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades, with 201st Guards Brigade, launched—until the sand-storms forced them to disengage—concentric attacks on Afrika Korps. Even Rommel's passion for the offensive had to give way to the logic of fact. At the end of this, its third day in operation, he abandoned his plan. He called off the seaborne landing against which Eighth Army had made preparations, and decided instead to fall back to the south-west against the line of British mine-fields, clear a gap and reopen direct communication with his base. The South African Official History has said: 'It was the only thing to do, but it was a confession of defeat.'<sup>2</sup> This is true; but he was permitted—because Ritchie did not seize his chance when he had it—to turn defeat into victory.

In order to reopen direct communication with his base Rommel would have to clear—and keep open—a line through the mine-

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45* by Maj.-Gen. F. W. von Mellenthin, p. 98. Kesselring's own account in his memoirs of this episode and his subsequent relations with Rommel is not without humour.

<sup>2</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 32.

fields to the west. But guarding the mine-fields was the defensive 'box' manned by 150th Brigade, of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division, with the 44th Royal Tank Regiment in support. Panzer Army's intelligence was so scanty that Rommel did not know of the existence of this 'box', and he and his subordinate commanders had a rude shock when they encountered fierce artillery fire at the first attempt to open a path through the mine-fields. It had, said Rommel, 'an extremely upsetting effect on our columns'.

Audacious on the offensive, Rommel was as methodical as Auchinleck when he was on the defensive, but he had—like Auchinleck—a quick intuitiveness which was not in Ritchie's make-up, nor in that of Ritchie's two corps commanders. Rommel, in a situation which was about as precarious as could be conceived, planned his way, speedily but carefully, out of his predicament: first, to open that path across the mine-fields, and in doing so destroy 150th Brigade; second, to destroy Bir Hacheim, which, on his southern flank, was as dangerous as 150th Brigade's 'box'; and third, to isolate and capture the divisions in the Gazala line.

The cool courage of this plan must compel admiration. The execution of every phase of it, however, depended on the British commanders failing to realize that they must exploit his plight and exploit it quickly, without fumbling and without delay. Rommel made it clear in his memoirs that he had got Ritchie's measure; but some of his subordinate commanders, including one or two tough, professional soldiers, were not quite so percipient or quite so resolute.

The failure of Eighth Army to seize the initiative—on May 29, on May 30 and on May 31—was disastrous. On May 30, despite 150th Brigade's interference, contact had been established by mid-day between Afrika Korps and Xth Italian Corps, the direct supply route from the west opened, and the 'box' surrounded. Rommel himself made a personal reconnaissance of it during the afternoon, and then drove on, across the mine-field, to a conference with Kesselring, the commander of the Xth Italian Corps, and (a new and significant arrival on the Desert scene) Hitler's personal adjutant, Major von Below.

Why was he allowed to do this? Why was 150th Brigade surrounded in its 'box'? Rommel's own explanation was convincing, but by no means flattering: 'The enemy was very hesitant in following up our movements. The withdrawal of the German-Italian formations had evidently come as a complete surprise to him, and in any case the British command never reacted very quickly.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 212.

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Lumsden, commanding 1st Armoured Division, did in fact order an attack by 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades. Afrika Korps fantastically overestimated the tanks deployed by these two formations at 430, and expected a major onslaught from them at any moment. However, all that happened was that, 'after suffering casualties from eighty-eight-millimetre and anti-tank guns, the British became discouraged and did not persist'.<sup>1</sup> Rommel put British tank losses that day at fifty-seven.

Liddell Hart's verdict on Eighth Army's conduct during May 30 was severe:

There was much discussion as to the most suitable direction and form of counter-attack, but too little sense of the time-factor, despite Auchinleck's urging. There was also undue optimism that Rommel was cornered, and would soon be forced to surrender.<sup>2</sup>

On May 31 Rommel concentrated all the offensive power he had—and he still had a good deal—on 150th Brigade in its 'box'. Like a medieval captain before a beleaguered fortress, he issued a formal summons to surrender, which the Brigade commander as formally rejected. The Afrika Korps, the 19th Light Division and the Italian Trieste Division then went into the assault. All day they had to fight for every yard they gained. Whatever criticism may be levelled against various aspects of Eighth Army's conduct in this summer campaign, no praise could be too high for the dour, tenacious bravery of these Tyneside Territorials. Rommel himself paid his tribute: 'The defence was conducted with considerable skill, and, as usual, the British fought to the last round.'

When night came 150th Brigade were still unconquered; and all day long no other formation in Eighth Army made a serious or sustained effort to come to their rescue. Ritchie indeed planned to begin his counter-attack on this very night, but, as Auchinleck recorded laconically, 'both corps commanders asked for twenty-four hours' respite so that they might assemble and prepare their forces'.<sup>3</sup>

Yet had they not asked for this respite they could even then have shattered Panzer Army finally. On the evening of May 31 two anxious officers went to see Rommel. They were General Nehring, now in command of Afrika Korps, and General Bayerlein, who had just become the Colonel-General's Chief-of-Staff, replacing Gause,

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45* by Maj.-Gen. F. W. Mellenthin, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tanks*, Vol. II, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Despatch, p. 48.



who had been wounded. They both begged him to break off the battle, but he would not hear of it. Bayerlein said later:

We were in a really desperate position, our backs against the mine-field, no food, no water, no petrol, very little ammunition, no way through the mines for our convoys, Bir Hacheim still holding out and preventing our getting supplies from the south. We were being attacked all the time from the air. In another twenty-four hours we should have had to surrender.<sup>1</sup>

The survivors of the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade were at this time being held as prisoners near Rommel's Headquarters. Their privations were so severe, thirst in particular, that they were fighting for the few drops of water that were served out for the wounded. A British officer, demanding to see Rommel, was taken to him and protested that, if the prisoners could not be given food and water, they should be released and sent back to the British lines.

Rommel was reasonable and even sympathetic. 'You are getting exactly the same ration of water as the Afrika Korps and myself,' he said, 'half a cup. But I quite agree that we cannot go on like this. If we don't get a convoy through tonight I shall have to ask General Ritchie for terms. You can take a letter to him for me. . . .'<sup>2</sup>

But Eighth Army did not move. The belief that Rommel could be brought to surrender was justified; but why did they not act upon it?

Yet that same night Rommel wrote to his wife:

I'm well. The great crisis of the battle is over and so far we've done well. But the next few days are still going to be hard. Cruewell has, unfortunately, fallen into British hands, complete with Storch, but I'm still hoping to hack a way out for him.<sup>3</sup>

On June 1 the Axis attacks were resumed, first by the Stuka dive-bombers and then by the infantry. Rommel and Colonel Westphal, who has figured before in this narrative, led the assault, and Westphal was badly wounded. By early afternoon the last British resistance had been overcome. The Axis forces took three thousand prisoners, and destroyed or captured 101 tanks and armoured cars and 124 guns of all kinds. Thus 150th Brigade were annihilated. And only on that day did Eighth Army make any serious attempt to come to their aid. 1st South African Division, asked to send an ammuni-

<sup>1</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 212.

tion convoy south to replenish them, promptly despatched a train of volunteers, who were never heard of again. 10th Indian Brigade were ordered to make a night attack, but found difficulty in concentrating rapidly, and General Messervy, who was in charge of the operation, called it off.

*General Rommel to Frau Rommel*

1 June 1942

The battle is going favourably for us; about four hundred tanks have been shot up. Our losses are bearable.<sup>1</sup>

*General Auchinleck and Air Marshal Tedder to Prime Minister*

1 June 1942

On evening May 26 General Rommel launched the German Afrika Korps to the attack. He was at pains to explain in an Order of the Day issued to all Italian and German troops under his command that in the course of great operations they were to carry through a decisive attack against our forces in Libya, and that for this purpose he had made ready and equipped a force superior in numbers, with perfected armament and a powerful air force to give it support. In conclusion he hailed His Majesty the King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia, the Duce of the Roman Empire, and the Führer of Great Germany. We had foreseen this attack and were ready for it. From captured documents it is clear that Rommel's object was to defeat our armoured forces and capture Tobruk.

The attacks against the Northern Front of our main positions south of Gazala on the 27th achieved little or nothing. An attempt to break through our defences along the coast road by the Gazala inlet was easily stopped. Throughout May 28, 29 and 30 there was very heavy and continuous fighting between our armoured divisions and brigades and the German Afrika Korps, backed up by the Italian Mobile Corps. The battle swayed backwards and forwards over a wide area from Acroma in the north to Bir Hacheim forty miles to the south, and from El Adem to our mine-fields thirty miles to the westward. The enemy, finding himself running short of supplies and water, had to make gaps in our mine-fields, one along the general line of the Trigh Capuzzo and another ten miles to the south. . . . It is still difficult to give a firm estimate of the number of vehicles and tanks knocked out or disabled by these attacks, but there has been ample confirmation that the effect was very great. Meantime each night our night

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 213.

bombers were attacking enemy forward aerodromes and his communications.

On May 31 the enemy had succeeded in withdrawing many of his tanks and much transport into one or other of these gaps, which he then proceeded to protect from attack from the east by bringing anti-tank guns, with which he is well equipped, into position. A large number of his tanks and many transport vehicles, however, remained on the wrong side of this barrier, and these are still being ceaselessly harried and destroyed by our troops, vigorously aided by the bombers and fighters of our Air Force.

The country to the east of Bir Hacheim is being mopped up by our troops, who have destroyed many tanks and vehicles in this area and captured two large workshops. Fierce fighting is still proceeding, and the battle is by no means over. Further heavy fighting is to be expected, but whatever may be the result there is no shadow of doubt that Rommel's plans for his initial offensive have gone completely awry and that this failure has cost him dear in men and material. The skill, determination and pertinacity shown by General Ritchie and his corps commanders, Lieutenant-Generals Norrie and Gott, throughout this difficult and strenuous week of hard and continuous fighting have been of the highest order.

Churchill read this telegram to the House of Commons on June 2 and commented:

From all the above it is clear that we have every reason to be satisfied and more than satisfied with the course that the battle has so far taken, and we should watch the further development with earnest attention.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

2 June 1942

I am much distressed over the loss of 150th Brigade after so gallant a fight, but still consider the situation favourable to us and getting better daily.

In fact, the situation which had been very favourable to Eighth Army on May 29 had become steadily less favourable with every day that passed, and several more days were allowed to pass without

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 321.

offensive action. Rommel by contrast acted promptly. On the night of June 1-2, 90th Light Division and the Trieste moved against the second and bigger thorn in Rommel's backside, Bir Hacheim. They crossed the mine-fields without heavy casualties and cut the fortress off from the east.

War is continuously ironic. The isolation and final crushing of the French garrison at Bir Hacheim were, like the fate of 150th Brigade, the direct consequences of the slowness, formalism and confused over-confidence of Eighth Army's tactical direction—or misdirection—of the battle. The gallantry of 150th Brigade was only fleetingly mentioned. Bir Hacheim withstood siege for ten days, and attained the utmost symbolical significance for the French. In those ten days a nation recovered the sense of soldierly valour which it thought it had lost. On the morning of June 2 Rommel issued the summons to surrender, which was rejected with contempt. The attack opened at midday. Rommel himself said that the battle was 'of extraordinary severity', and recorded that he frequently took over command of the assault forces himself, and that seldom in Africa was he given such a hard-fought struggle.

Meanwhile Eighth Army deliberated about their next step; and Auchinleck in Cairo became aware that the picture might not be nearly as rosy as it had so far been painted. There was a long conference that night in the War Room.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie* 3 June 1942. 01.00 hrs.<sup>1</sup>

I am glad you think the situation is still favourable to us and that it is improving daily. All the same I view the destruction of 150th Brigade and the consolidation by the enemy of a broad and deep wedge in the middle of your position with some misgiving. I am sure, however, there are factors known to you which I do not know.

I feel myself,

- (a) that if the enemy is allowed to consolidate himself in his present positions in the area Sidra-Harmat-Mteifel, our Gazala position including Bir Hacheim will become untenable eventually even if he does not renew his offensive;
- (b) that situated as he is, he is rapidly becoming able to regain the initiative which you have wrested from him in the last week's fighting. This cannot be allowed to happen.

<sup>1</sup> Correctly, the text of this letter published in Auchinleck's Despatch is dated June 3; various historians and commentators have quoted it using this date. It must be stressed, however, that it was based on the facts as known in Cairo not later than midnight on June 2.

I agree with you entirely that you cannot let your armour be defeated in detail and that you cannot risk it against his now strongly defended front north and south of El Harmat. Therefore he must be shifted by other means and quickly, before he can begin to act against the exposed southern flank of 50th Division or against Bir Hacheim, or in an attempt to cut your supply line east of El Adem, all of which seem possible courses for him to adopt.

I feel that the quickest and easiest way to shift him is by an offensive directed towards Temrad so as to threaten his bases, coupled with threats from Segnali and the south against his lines of supply.

His tanks cannot be in two places at once and you still have some infantry tanks with which to support your infantry and protect your artillery, of which you should have a good deal now. It is, I think, highly important that you should keep at least one infantry division concentrated and complete in mobile reserve, so that you have at your disposal a really strong weapon with which to strike. I am a little perturbed by the apparent dispersion of 5th Indian Division, but I daresay it is more apparent than real.

I repeat that in my opinion you must strike hard and at once if we are to avoid a stalemate, that is unless the enemy is foolish enough to fling himself against your armour. I wish he would but I don't think you can count on this at present.

De Guingand flew up, taking this letter with him. Auchinleck pencilled a postscript to it: 'De Guingand knows what is in my mind.'

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

*3 June 1942*

Your special message reached me in the middle of last night. Thank you so much for it. I agree almost entirely with all its contents, but there are one or two points I would like to make.

The two alternatives appear to me to be:

- (a) to resume the offensive as early as possible directed on the line Tmimi-Afrag;
- (b) to deal first with the 'cauldron'.

Of these two alternatives it had been my intention to resume the offensive and leave the armour to mask the 'cauldron', and I left this H.Q. at 5 a.m. this morning for a conference with the corps commanders to get this fixed up. For various reasons, with which I am dealing, replacements in armour are not coming through as quickly as they should. This is due to the crews not

being collected together quickly enough; that is most serious. It will be righted today, but the net result is that I now feel that our armour may not be able to contain the enemy while the offensive is in progress and the enemy's armour may, therefore, be a real danger to me being able to continue supplies forward and against the rear of the Gazala-Alem Hamza position.

I was, as you are, most keen to carry out the offensive with the right shoulder forward, but the enemy in his present position makes it extremely difficult to form up a division behind our present frontage between Gazala and Alem Hamza without fear of its preparations being interrupted. For this reason I had to discard that plan.

My next idea was to make a very wide turning movement with the 5th Ind. Div. south of Hacheim directed on Afrag, but after the information I have had from the corps commanders today respecting the strength of our armour I cannot risk this.

It is absolutely essential that we should wrest from the enemy the initiative which he is now starting to exercise and this must be done at the soonest possible moment. In the circumstances I have decided that I must crush him in the 'cauldron' and the plan for doing this will be a pincer movement, one arm coming from the north with 69th Inf. Bde supported by 'I' tanks, the other from the east to be carried out by 5th Ind. Div. supported by 4th R.T.R. and 22nd Armd Bde for exploitation. . . . I hope by this means to drive a wedge through the enemy's anti-tank defences under cover of darkness . . . and this will enable me to exploit with armour through this corridor into the rear of the enemy and close the gaps behind him. Once it is completed we will return to the offensive generally on the lines of the right shoulder forward.

I am going at once into the question of a raiding force to threaten the Martuba and Derna landing grounds, and I am sorry that I had not understood your intention in regard to this matter.

The operation I have decided to undertake is the one which can be put into action quickest and will therefore wrest the initiative from the enemy in the shortest possible time.

Freddie de Guingand takes this letter and can give you more details of my plan.

The thought of Malta was never absent from anyone's mind.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck and Air Marshal Tedder*

2 June 1942

There is no need for me to stress the vital importance of the safe

arrival of our convoys at Malta, and I am sure you will both take all steps to enable the air escorts, and particularly the Beau-fighters, to be operated from landing grounds as far west as possible. I hope that you have prepared a plan for bringing Martuba into use as an advance refuelling base immediately it is in our possession, including arrangements for guards, A.A. protection, and possibly the transport by air of aviation petrol, oil and ammunition for operations by our fighters. Even two refuellings might make a decisive difference. Other points will no doubt occur to you both. Let me know as soon as possible that all arrangements are complete.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

3 June 1942

You asked me yesterday about the date of the convoy which you said you urgently required to know. I hope de Guingand has given you the information today. I must admit that I feel that this date will not now have nearly as much influence on any offensive movement you have in mind as must the tactical situation which will result from the present fighting.

You would not, I imagine, think of holding back your offensive solely to synchronize with the sailing of the convoy. I feel that your offensive must be made immediately the tactical situation on your front permits. The primary effect of a successful offensive will be to deny the landing grounds in the area Martuba-Derna to the enemy. The second and even more important result would be to allow us the use of these landing grounds for our own aircraft, thus greatly increasing the cover for the convoy.

The sooner we can produce these effects the better, and the longer we have to consolidate ground gained before the convoy sails, the easier it will be to produce the second result, which is supremely desirable.

Of course if things should go really well, and we can get on even still farther, so much the better, as the power of the enemy air to interfere with the convoy decreases as he is driven farther back. This again is another reason for getting forward as soon as it is humanly possible to do so. But I know you realize all this just as well as I do, and I have no doubts at all that if you can get on, you will.

You will, I am sure, have made all arrangements for suitable forces to defend the landing grounds, should we get them, from enemy counter-attacks, which must be expected. It will mean getting a good lot of anti-aircraft artillery forward pretty quickly I imagine.

I saw Stirling this morning, and I think he has a good show laid on.<sup>1</sup>

The news this morning did not surprise me. I expected the enemy to renew his efforts to carry out his original plan as soon as he felt he had a secure base inside our position. He should, however, be nothing like as strong as he was before. In particular, your relative superiority in tanks should be much greater, and I feel you may have a good chance of cracking him now. I hope you will keep him out of Bir Hacheim, as if that goes I feel our mobility will be greatly restricted, and his ability to worry our flanks and rear correspondingly increased.

I feel a little anxious lest he should now turn against 50th Div. from the south, using his anti-tank guns to form a protective flank to the east and so keep off our tanks. I expect you are ready for this.

It may be that he intends to try his double attack against our Northern Front once more, that is tanks from the east, and tanks, artillery and infantry (goth Lt Div.) from the west. I know you are ready for this, too.

I am puzzled whether the attack on Hacheim was a feint to draw off attention from a real attack in the north, or whether the reverse is the case. He has sent apparently an equal number of tanks in each direction—towards Tamar and also Bir Hacheim. It looks as if the Hacheim attack was meant to succeed. I hope it hasn't!

No more now. Good luck to you and your men. I think of nothing else.

The conditions of desert warfare from 1940 to 1943 encouraged initiative and independence of mind in commanders, from those of quite small formations upwards. But these admirable qualities needed the counter-balance of the highest standard of discipline and self-control. The observation of the South African official historians, 'There was plenty of energy in Eighth Army, though it was not directed at any particular aim,' is just, but does not go far enough. Perfect harmony and understanding are not always to be expected

<sup>1</sup> Col. David Stirling, commanding the Special Air Service, had just returned to Cairo from an operation far behind the enemy lines, chiefly raiding shipping in Benghazi harbour. On June 2 he saw the D.M.O., was told of the mid-June convoy, and was asked what S.A.S. could do to reduce enemy attacks from the air. On June 3 he saw the C-in-C. with a detailed plan for eight raids on airfields on the night of June 13-14. A full account of this episode is to be found in *The Phantom Major* by Virginia Cowles, Ch. VIII.



among senior soldiers in war, any more than among the senior executives of a great industry in peace time; but there is detectable in the handling of Eighth Army at this period a *malaise*, more deep-seated and more corrosive than the zestful, if slightly misplaced, optimism of earlier times. The British generals argued among themselves, and Rommel acted. The arguments were more than once acrimonious. There was a lack of grip both over the situation and over individuals.

Desmond Young, a lieutenant-colonel, the senior officer of Indian Army Public Relations in the Middle East, who had been a youthful battalion commander in World War I, and was possessed of an incurable desire to be where the trouble was hottest, told Alan Moorehead, the war correspondent of the *Daily Express*, on June 2 or 3, that he was afraid that 'we had already missed the boat by not launching an attack with 5th Indian Division, under General Briggs, when Rommel was pinned against the mine-field'. Young saw Briggs more than once on June 2, and 'together we deplored the delay'.<sup>1</sup>

General Briggs himself said:

It was not till Rommel had established himself in our mine-fields, had overrun 150th Brigade, and was threatening Bir Hacheim that I was called in. 'Strafer' Gott, optimistic as usual, sent for me. The Army Commander was coming to a conference in two hours' time. Would I meanwhile consider attacking Tmimi through the South African position along the coast. It was held by a German parachute division and half of 15th Panzer Division, protected by unlocated mine-fields. I had to collect in the division, plan, reconnoitre, and attack within thirty-six hours. I never thought harder in my life.

My answer was in the shape of an alternative. I suggested a desert move round the south of Bir Hacheim on to Tmimi and Rommel's L. of C. . . . This was agreed to by both Ritchie and Gott, and I thought everything was settled. . . . In my absence the whole plan was changed to a frontal attack against Rommel in his prepared position.<sup>2</sup>

This frontal attack was Messervy's suggestion. Gott declined to be responsible for it; and Norrie of 30th Corps took it on, but left the details to be worked out by Briggs and by Messervy, who personally assured Ritchie that it was 'quite feasible'.

<sup>1</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Antony Brett-James, *Ball of Fire*, p. 177.

## OPERATION 'VENEZIA'

At the end of these protracted deliberations Ritchie returned to his own Headquarters and wrote a six-page paper on the course which he wanted future operations to take. This bore singularly little relation either to what had been discussed or to what was to happen.

On June 4 Ritchie sent it down to Cairo with a covering note:

Will you please say if this meets with your approval. I have not discussed this particular paper with 'Mary' but we have often talked on these lines. My staff has, however, been in close touch with his in its preparation.

The paper was in Auchinleck's hands by 18.00 hours on the evening of June 4. He scrutinized it with extreme care. The most disquieting aspect of it was that it ignored all that had happened in the past four days, and took it for granted that Rommel was still bottled up in the 'arena'—now renamed the 'cauldron'—in as bad a condition as he had been on May 29, and that the initiative which then had been in Ritchie's hands was still there. The paper considered two alternative courses:

(a) To continue to form defended localities to the west of Hacheim, to extend our L. of C. across the desert towards Ben Gania with a view to supporting a striking force, to cut off all troops in the Jebel by preventing a withdrawal to the south, and eventually securing the Agheila position.

(b) To break through the enemy defences in the coastal sector, to seize and hold the line Tmimi-Mechili and so isolate the enemy force in the desert away from his water and forward dumps in the eastern Jebel, as the first step in the advance to secure Cyrenaica.

The second alternative was chosen; and some paragraphs further on 'the general conception of the immediate advance' was propounded, and after it the 'immediate objective'.

### *General conception of the immediate advance*

We must regard the Gazala-Hacheim line as our 'Frontier Defences'—the firm base for all future operations until Cyrenaica is secured. Any advance made now before we are in a position to secure Cyrenaica finally must be regarded as a venture. It must be carried out most economically and in such a way that the risk of losses in men and material, if the enemy resistance strengthens beyond our expectations, are avoided. Speed and determination

are essential if the enemy's reverse is to be exploited to the full. He must be continually harassed and his powers of resistance for the final phase reduced. Our actions during the next few months must be devoted to helping the Navy to replenish Malta which, when revived, will be able materially to help us to annihilate the enemy in North Africa.

*Immediate Objective*

To deny the use of Benghazi to the enemy and to secure for our own use the important air bases in Cyrenaica.

In paragraph 15 the plan was outlined:

(1) The operation will be conducted on a double axis forward of the Gazala-Hacheim position.

(2) Troops required:

Jebel force for Jebel route:

One Inf. Div.

One Inf. Bde Gp

One Army Tank Bde

Desert force for Desert route:

One Armd Bde on Stuart-'Crusader' basis

One Armd Bde on Grant-Stuart basis

One Motor Bde

At a later state a further force will be required to protect the railway and the forward base whilst it is being built up. This will probably need one inf. div.

*Note:* The exact composition of the forces must depend upon the line of withdrawal taken by the enemy. The above is a basis on which plans can be made.

(3) Operation will be conducted in phases by turning the enemy flank from the south and disrupting his L. of C.

In order fully to savour the extraordinary quality of this paper, it is necessary to realize that it was prepared and sent to the Commander-in-Chief three days after the destruction of 150th Brigade, while Rommel's assault on Bir Hacheim was in full swing, and after the contradictory—and, as was proved, calamitous—discussions at Gott's Headquarters.

Had Auchinleck had any inkling of what was really afoot in Eighth Army, it is inconceivable that he would not have gone up and restored order. In an equally critical situation in November—though its origins were very different—he had done just this and had saved the battle. This time the real measure of the malady, which

was, it must be admitted, much subtler and much more difficult to diagnose, was not disclosed to him. In November Galloway had acted. In June there was no Galloway.

Auchinleck did not answer Ritchie's note or comment on his paper until June 9. In the five intervening days Eighth Army had lumbered into a major defeat; and the paper survived, stripped of all value save that of historical, but supremely ironic, interest.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Battle in the Cauldron

THE battle in the Cauldron on June 5 was the result of the compromise accepted by Ritchie, based on a scheme worked out by Messervy and Briggs. Its code-name was 'Aberdeen'. Its intention was to drive a wedge into the Cauldron area, establish a number of brigade positions there, and possibly reach the mine-field beyond. This was to be done in three stages. First, 10th Indian Brigade would advance west under cover of darkness, and pass round the northern end of the inner mine-field running from Bir el Harmat to Bir Hacheim, which would protect their left flank and breach the Axis positions at the Aslagh ridge. At first light next morning 22nd Armoured Brigade, operating under 7th Armoured Division, would pass through the breach, make a deep penetration westward, and seize Sidi Muftah. 9th Indian Brigade would follow and establish strong positions in the area won. Command of the operation would alternate between 5th Indian Division and 7th Armoured Division, according to the formations chiefly engaged.

On June 3 Auchinleck accepted this plan for 'Aberdeen', but urged that there must be thorough reconnaissance and preparation, even at the cost of delay, and emphasized that the infantry engaged in the operation must have the support of tanks.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

*4 June 1942*

Need for recce fully appreciated and commanders have been told that operations will be postponed twenty-four hours if further time for recce required. Messervy and Briggs are the two commanders concerned.

Later that day Eighth Army passed back to G.H.Q. a message from 7th Armoured Division: 'Everything ready for tonight and plenty of time for recce.' And at 21.50 hours 30th Corps told Eighth Army: 'Commanders concerned in "Aberdeen" full of beans and happy.'

\* \* \*

Auchinleck summed up 'Aberdeen' in his despatch:

The failure of Eighth Army's counter-attack on June 5 was probably the turning point of the battle. Until then our chances of putting the enemy to flight and even of destroying him had seemed good.<sup>1</sup>

Those chances had, however, vanished at least three days earlier. As Desmond Young put it:

The Afrika Korps was itself again, with petrol, food, water and ammunition, with plenty of eighty-eight-millimetre guns in position and with tanks behind them in the salient.<sup>2</sup>

The battle of the Cauldron has been described as a 'mournful and unmitigated disaster, in the account of which there can be no comfort for our arms'.<sup>3</sup>

It took some time for comprehension of the magnitude of the disaster to reach either Eighth Army or G.H.Q. For many years thereafter British accounts of it were noticeably incomplete, if not evasive. Planned in haste, with far too little preparation and far too little understanding of the enemy's resources and intentions, executed in an atmosphere of muddle and confusion, it was the classic example of the mood of blundering amateurishness which enveloped Eighth Army at this time.

There was muddle from the outset. The plan which Messervy and Briggs drew up was based on the confident expectation that the R.A.F. were to bomb Axis troops to the south of the Cauldron and to make fighter sweeps throughout the day. But 13th Corps, which had no responsibility for the main operation, signalled to the R.A.F. on the morning of June 5: 'No bombing in the Cauldron today.'

At 02.50 hours on the night of June 4-5 a heavy artillery bombardment began of what were thought to be the Ariete positions. Panzer Army H.Q. could hear the sound of the guns and saw the eastern sky bright with flashes; they awaited the first reports anxiously. Ariete Division signalled cheerfully that the shells were falling well short of their positions. The bombardment expended itself uselessly on the empty desert. Von Mellenthin commented: 'The artillery

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Rommel*, p. 125. Young, along with the commander of 10th Indian Infantry Brigade, was himself taken prisoner that day.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tiger Kills*, p. 125.



overture provided a fitting prelude to the events of the day.<sup>1</sup>

At dawn Briggs and Messervy ordered a full-out attack on the infantry of Ariete Division, holding the Aslagh ridge. This was resolute and successful. The Italians gave way; the ridge was cleared, and 9th Indian Brigade and 22nd Armoured Brigade went forward to drive the Axis forces out of the Cauldron. The British tanks encountered heavy fire from the German guns and withdrew, having suffered considerable losses. German and Italian tanks then counter-attacked, inflicting heavy casualties on the two British infantry battalions—2nd Highland Light Infantry and 2nd West Yorks—who were, as ordered, trying to establish 'boxes' in the Cauldron. While they were under attack the infantry received no protection or support from 22nd Armoured Brigade, whose commander subsequently stated emphatically that General Messervy had told him that he had no responsibility for the infantry.

Brigadier B. C. Fletcher, commander of 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, said in his report a few weeks later:

There appears to have been a complete misunderstanding between 22nd Armd Bde and 9th Ind. Inf. Bde as to the capabilities and tasks of the two brigades. 22nd Armd Bde appears to have thought that a battalion could establish itself in a 'box' in the desert in a matter of half an hour; while 9th Ind. Inf. Bde thought that the 22nd Armd Bde, with its hundred tanks, had been given the task of destroying the enemy tanks in this area in which it was to establish itself. In point of fact, the 22nd Armd Bde appears to have made no attempt to go to the assistance of 2nd W. Yorks when they were attacked by forty tanks and seventeen armoured cars; and when the position held by 2nd H.L.I. was attacked by forty tanks, the 22nd Armd Bde began a slow withdrawal. . . . Infantry who have to operate with tanks should be trained with them.

Meanwhile, 32nd Army Tank Brigade attacked 21st Panzer Division on Sidra ridge. This attack was supported by only twelve guns, and it was brought to a halt with a loss of fifty tanks out of seventy.

The heavy British tanks lumbered forward in daylight, providing perfect targets for our anti-tank guns; and ending up on a mine-field where they were simply shot to pieces. From the tactical

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 105. Von Mellenthin provides the most concise and factually accurate record hitherto available of these two disastrous days.



point of view this was one of the most ridiculous attacks of the campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The weather that day was of some significance. It was one of the hottest days of the Middle East summer: small cones of dust—the soldiers called them ‘dust devils’—swirled across the plain; and there were frequent mirages, which:

... may have played some part in the battle, for throughout the day contradictory and confused reports compelled commanders to make repeated reconnaissances before issuing orders. On more than one occasion the infantry reported enemy tanks on their front when the British armour could not find them there. . . .<sup>2</sup>

By midday, however confused the battle seemed to the British, on the Axis side it was clear that their opponents’ offensive had been held, and that the attacking formations had suffered severe losses. Late in the afternoon Rommel launched a swift, fierce counter-attack. While 21st Panzer Division thrust south-eastwards into the Cauldron, 15th Panzer Division came out of their lair in the mine-fields near Bir el Harmat and struck at the flank and rear of 10th Indian Infantry Brigade on the Aslagh ridge. Rommel himself accompanied the southern attack. It overwhelmed a single infantry battalion—the 1st Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry—which had been placed as a flank guard, and overran Briggs’s and Messervy’s joint Headquarters. For Messervy this was an uncomfortably familiar experience. The result was that, though the two Generals escaped capture, command and communications broke down completely.

The British Staff never regained control, and for the rest of June 5 and 6 battalions, batteries, and even companies found themselves left to their own devices and fought or extricated themselves, or simply lay helpless as fortune served.<sup>3</sup>

To add to the tribulations of the hapless troops, the Luftwaffe put in a heavy bombing attack on the area west of the Knightsbridge ‘box’.

At 15.10 hours Eighth Army H.Q. signalled to G.H.Q. that the operation has not been ‘wholly unsuccessful’, and that there were signs that the enemy was ‘not entirely happy’.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tiger Kills*, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 45.

Rommel, in fact, was at his most buoyant; but his zest was tempered now by a caution which perhaps the tumultuous experiences of the previous week had taught him.

At midnight Eighth Army at least knew—and reported to G.H.Q.—that the enemy ‘had begun to counter-attack’, but it was not yet clear exactly what had happened. This signal concluded with the strange assertion: ‘22nd Armoured Brigade no doubt taking action in support’ of 5th Indian Division.

But 22nd Armoured Brigade were not. They leaguered several miles away that night, awaiting the chance to replenish their thinned stocks of fuel and ammunition. Messervy, his Headquarters scattered, his communications broken down, had at least some glimmering of what had happened.

The task now in hand [he wrote in his report] was to make prodigious efforts to relieve 10th Brigade, and for this purpose I considered that all our armour would be needed. I asked for the support of 1st Armoured Div. who had 4th Armoured Brigade under its command. This was agreed.

Messervy then had three armoured brigades at his disposal: 2nd, 4th and 22nd. He continued:

My plan was for 2nd Armoured Brigade to move round the Knightsbridge ‘box’, and under cover of its guns direct on Bir el Aslagh, while 4th Armoured Brigade came up on its outer (southern) flank in echelon and within supporting distance of 2nd Armoured Brigade. 22nd Armoured Brigade, who had had a very hard twenty-four hours, were to be in reserve.<sup>1</sup>

There is no indication that any inkling of this plan was ever conveyed (until long after it had ceased to matter) to either Ritchie or Auchinleck. There is the clearest indication that it was never put into execution.

Messervy’s report stated of June 6 with a strange, unabashed candour: ‘Everything went wrong this day.’ It went wrong, to be frank, because nobody had the slightest idea what was happening or what he and his unit were intended to do. A characteristic example of this confusion,<sup>2</sup> cited by Messervy himself in the next sentence of

<sup>1</sup> They had lost some sixty tanks, and their war diary said sadly of June 5, ‘So ended a most unfortunate day.’

<sup>2</sup> The troops had a word for it, *cumfu*, which is printable but unfortunately untranslatable.

his report, was that 'through some misunderstanding of the orders issued in code (our divisional code was new to them) to 2nd Armoured Brigade they read west for east'. It was all very well for Messervy to claim that the movement which followed this misreading 'undoubtedly drew off the enemy temporarily'; it did not serve to help 10th Indian Division in their plight.

During that long, burning summer day, which three British armoured brigades spent (as von Mellenthin put it) 'moving backwards and forwards in accordance with contradictory orders', the surrounded units fought bravely on. But they were doomed. At the end of the day the Afrika Korps alone claimed that its captures were 3,100 prisoners, ninety-six guns and thirty-seven anti-tank guns.

The guns were fought to the last. One officer who was captured that day escaped, and six months later, on the crest of Eighth Army's advance, he passed the Cauldron battlefield. 'The guns were still in position surrounded by burned-out vehicles. The gunners lay where they had fallen, the faithful layers still crouched over their sights.'<sup>1</sup>

General Messervy's summing-up was:

So ended a disastrous day and an attempt to clear the Cauldron in which everything had gone awry. It was my own impression that it came several days too late. The enemy had built up his strength and reorganized his armour; he was just ready for his next forward move, not yet lying exhausted licking his wounds.

It would have been better had some impression that the counter-offensive was belated been conveyed to Messervy and the other senior commanders a good deal earlier.

The Axis forces claimed that they had destroyed or captured 115 tanks and armoured cars. Eighth Army tank returns showed a decline in cruisers from 300 on the night of June 4 to 132 on the morning of June 7. 10th Indian Brigade had been virtually destroyed; two battalions of 9th Indian Brigade had suffered heavy losses; and 21st Indian Brigade had lost one battalion and all the brigade's anti-tank guns. Four regiments of artillery had been completely wiped out. The three British armoured brigades had all suffered heavily. 32nd Army Tank Brigade had lost fifty out of its seventy tanks, and the Support Group of 22nd Armoured Brigade had been totally destroyed.

Such were the consequences of 'Aberdeen'. How soon and how

<sup>1</sup> *Royal Artillery Commemoration Book*, p. 123.

accurately was the extent of the disaster appreciated either in Eighth Army Headquarters or in G.H.Q. ? Ritchie, signalling to Cairo at midnight on June 6-7, spoke of 'heavy fighting with the enemy doing most of the attacking against our guns and infantry supported by armour'; no details were available, but the enemy was 'believed to have suffered considerable losses', and there were indications 'from the usual sources that the enemy's position is not too easy'. On the whole Ritchie felt that the day had been in his favour.<sup>1</sup> At midday on June 7 he signalled: 'Yesterday was a day of hard fighting in which we suffered considerably, but I am confident that enemy suffered no less.' Eighth Army's situation reports did not even mention the loss of four field regiments of artillery and of the Support Group of 22nd Armoured Brigade. Ritchie's telegram reported: '10th Indian Brigade was withdrawn last night from its forward position Bir el Tamar to Aslagh and it may be necessary to form a composite brigade of it and 9th Indian Brigade. Gunners look like being bottle-neck.' The neck of the bottle was to be found in those dead gun-layers who had fallen across the sights of their guns, to rise no more.

The South African official historians have commented: 'Even at this distance of time it would not be without value to know who was responsible for withholding information of the losses suffered by Eighth Army.'<sup>2</sup>

It is unlikely that responsibility will ever be laid at the right door. However, when the truth about the magnitude of the disaster could no longer be concealed, there was a determined and successful effort to shift the blame for it. Colonel (now Lieutenant-General Sir Ian) Jacob arrived in Cairo, as a member of the Prime Minister's staff on his momentous visit in August, two months after these lamentable happenings. He had a number of conversations with officers of his own standing and seniority; he summarized the results of these talks in the diary which he kept of the whole journey.

Everyone [Colonel Jacob recorded on August 6] regards General Dorman-Smith as a menace of the first order, and responsible for many of the evil theories which have led to such mistakes

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 48. It is to be noted that the Auchinleck papers contain no communications of any kind from Ritchie to the Commander-in-Chief between June 4 and June 11. There are no telegrams, and none of those long letters giving meticulously detailed narratives and appreciations which Ritchie had sent daily during earlier phases of the campaign.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.

in the handling of the Army. . . . All are agreed that faulty leadership and bad tactics were the principal causes of our defeat. It seems that General Auchinleck and General Ritchie, perhaps influenced by Dorman-Smith, came to the conclusion that one of the main lessons of the previous campaign ('Crusader') was that warfare in the desert demands great flexibility. The theory was that the division was too unwieldy a formation, and that operations should be carried out by the brigade group, or 'battle group'—an even smaller detachment. This theory was put into effect on a grand scale, with the result that no formation ever fought for long under the command and staff who had been training it. Brigades were taken from their divisions and pushed into the battle piecemeal. Some cavalry regiments were even broken up, squadron by squadron, and sent up to join other regiments. The well-tryed principle that the best results from artillery are obtained by its centralized control was forgotten. The Army was broken into a thousand fragments. Whether or not this flexibility-run-wild was responsible, it is undoubtedly true that we showed ourselves incapable of concentrating superior force, and of utilizing the whole of our resources simultaneously. This showed itself in the dismal recurrence of the same event, namely, the over-running of brigade after brigade by an enemy in superior force, while the rest of the Army appeared powerless to assist.

For example, the 1st South African Division and the 50th Division took no effective part in the battle of Gazala, while Bir Hacheim and later a brigade of the 50th Division itself in an isolated locality, were overwhelmed.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the battle the Germans were always in superior force, when fighting was taking place.

Colonel Jacob transcribed these impressions in complete good faith. With the exception of the trivial error which has been noted, the analysis of the course which the fighting took in the last week of May and the first week of June was accurate. This was what did in fact happen. But to imply, as Jacob's informants did, that the responsibility for it lay not with the Commander of Eighth Army, his staff and subordinate commanders, but with the Commander-in-Chief and his newly-appointed D.C.G.S. was, to put it mildly, a quite unwarrantable interpretation of the facts—an interpretation which, of course, was not Jacob's own but that of those whose views he was reporting.

<sup>1</sup> In fact, as has been seen, the capture of the 150th Brigade 'box' preceded the assault on Bir Hacheim.

They did not know in August 1942 that Auchinleck had written to Ritchie on May 20:

*I consider it to be of the highest importance that you should not break up the organization of either of the armoured divisions. They have been trained to fight as divisions, I hope, and fight as divisions they should.<sup>1</sup>*

But they must have known that the breaking-up of the divisions, which was one of the prime causes of the disaster, was not the result of any 'evil theory' put into Auchinleck's or Ritchie's mind by Dorman-Smith (who only arrived from South Africa and took up his appointment on Monday, May 18), but of disregard of Auchinleck's clearly expressed advice, and of tactical ineptitude in the field. They must have known that both these two factors were completely outside the limits of Dorman-Smith's control or responsibility.

What, then, was Auchinleck's responsibility? His advice was flouted, and the catastrophic consequences of that flouting were kept from him as long as possible; whether deliberately or as a result of the confusion which prevailed in Eighth Army from June 4-5 onwards cannot now be ascertained. His responsibility was, therefore, indirect, but grievous. In the end he was to shoulder the whole burden himself, and to turn defeat into victory. In the bewilderment, heat, haste and bitterness of the immediate aftermath of these events, mistakes and misapprehensions were possible; but on the foundation of these mistakes not only were grave decisions taken at the time, but what passed as history for a decade or more was written. It would indeed be of some value, even at this distance of time, to know who was responsible not only for withholding information about the true extent of Eighth Army's losses, but for the whole edifice of misrepresentation of which this withheld information was only a part.

\* \* \*

Messervy, summing up his opinions at the end of his report when he gave up the command of 1st Armoured Division, said:

The battle throughout appeared to junior formation commanders to be without a theme; such a feeling is inevitable when the enemy has the initiative. The great lesson to my mind is: The initiative, especially in desert war, is of priceless value. Every effort must be

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 507.

made to gain and hold it. Great risks are justified to regain it if lost.

Rommel now had the initiative, and he took advantage of it with all the gusto and speed of which he was capable. He was also more methodical than he had been before. He kept to his decision to eliminate Bir Hacheim before bursting out of the Cauldron, in order (as he hoped) to complete the defeat of Eighth Army. A strong detachment of 15th Panzer Division was moved southwards on June 8 to support 90th Light and the Italian Trieste Division who, in spite of Rommel's personal leadership, were making slow progress in the face of very determined French resistance. Heavy Stuka bombardment prepared the way for a successful attack on June 9 by the infantry of 15th Panzer; they captured a point overlooking the main French position, and on the night of June 10-11 the French garrison, in obedience to Ritchie's orders, withdrew, escorted by the tanks of 7th Armoured Division. By the morning of the 11th it was reported that at least two thousand men had been safely withdrawn, and that many others were coming in. In the whole course of the Desert war the Germans, said von Mellenthin, 'never encountered a more heroic and well-sustained defence'.<sup>1</sup> Across two years the echoes of Narvik are not difficult to hear.

On June 9 Auchinleck answered Ritchie's letter of June 4 and commented upon it briefly:

I have read your paper carefully, and I think there is a lot of sound sense in it.

I do not agree with the conclusion, however, that the best method to adopt is that advocated in the paper, namely, a deliberate advance through the Jebel, driving the enemy before us.

I think the plan is wrong because the object is wrong. It is not a correct definition of my object to say that 'the object of the Eighth Army is to secure Cyrenaica'. I hold that the object of the Eighth Army is: 'To destroy the enemy forces in Cyrenaica as far to the eastward as may be possible, so as to enable us *rapidly* to occupy Cyrenaica and thereafter hold it securely.'

I trust you agree with this definition.

On the same day Churchill signalled:

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 106.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

9 June 1942

I have been continually thinking about your great battle and how we can best sustain your army so that it may be fought out to a victorious end. Here is some good news.

The 8th Armoured Division is now at the Cape, and the 44th Division is nearing Freetown. We have deliberately kept an option on the ultimate destination of these divisions until we could see our way more clearly. Some time ago I promised the Australian Government that if Australia were seriously invaded we would immediately divert both these divisions to their assistance. Australia up to date has not been seriously invaded, and in view of the naval losses which the Japanese have sustained in the battles of the Coral Sea and off Midway Island we regard a serious invasion in the near future as extremely improbable. We were also prepared, though we have never promised Wavell, to send both these divisions to India if it looked as though the Japanese had an invasion of India in mind. This also seems extremely improbable at the moment, and India has already got the 2nd, 5th and 70th British Divisions.

We have therefore decided that the 8th Armoured Division and the 44th Division should be sent to you unless Australia is threatened with serious invasion within the next few days. You may therefore make your plans for the battle on the assumption that the 8th Armoured Division will reach Suez at the end of June and the 44th Division by mid-July.

Thereafter, depending on the general situation then prevailing, you should be prepared to send to India one of your Indian divisions and another Indian armoured brigade. Pray let us have your proposals so that we may tell General Wavell.

A detailed account of the exact state of the 8th Armoured Division and of the technical preparedness of its tanks, together with the exact loading on the various ships and their dates of arrival, is being sent you separately. You can thus make the best possible plan for disembarking, organizing and bringing it into action in the most effective manner with the least delay. We feel that with this rapidly approaching reserve behind you you will be able to act with greater freedom in using your existing resources. All good wishes.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

10 June 1942

I feel greatly encouraged by your good wishes. I hope to be able to show you some returns from all the hard and bitter fighting which has taken place during the last two weeks. It is most



welcome to know that we may get the 44th and 8th Armoured Divisions in this theatre, and I am at once proceeding with plans to make the best use of them, although I appreciate that this decision may be changed. The 8th Armoured Divisional Commander is now in Cairo.

I note that later I may be ordered to send to India an Indian infantry division and an Indian armoured brigade. It is known to you that I have nothing like enough troops either to face a German attack through Anatolia or to defend Persia, and I must plan to meet these threats, although I realize that they may never materialize. I appreciate that the threat to India may materialize quicker and be of a more serious nature than a threat to my north and north-eastern fronts, and that since the largest strategical issues will be at stake, you alone are in a position to allot troops to meet these eventualities. I only mention commitments in Syria, Iraq, and Persia in order to remind you that unless we are substantially reinforced before the Germans have penetrated too deeply, the chances of a successful defence in these theatres with our present resources are slim.

As you say, the knowledge that these two fresh and powerful divisions are coming will considerably increase my freedom of action with the troops I have at present. You probably know that already, in order to strengthen Eighth Army, I have moved considerable forces from Iraq to Libya.

We are all most grateful to you.

On the same day, June 10, Auchinleck telegraphed to London an estimate of the casualties sustained by both sides between May 26 and June 7.

He pointed out the difficulty of getting the details of losses in personnel and equipment while the battle was still raging. 'Our own losses,' he said, 'are estimated very approximately at ten thousand, of whom eight thousand may be prisoners, but the casualties of the 5th Indian Division are not yet accurately known.' He had no figures of the enemy killed and wounded, but he thought they must be 'probably equal to and possibly greater than ours'. There were four thousand Axis prisoners, of whom 1,660 were German. The Axis had lost four hundred tanks—211 of these were 'guaranteed certain'. British tank losses, including those which might still be recovered, were 350; the total armoured strength fit for action on June 9 was, therefore, 254 cruiser and sixty-seven infantry tanks. One hundred and twenty enemy guns had been destroyed. British artillery losses were heavier: ten medium and 140 field guns,

forty-two six-pounders and 153 two-pounders. R.A.F. aircraft lost totalled 176, with seventy pilots killed, missing or wounded. R.A.F. H.Q. estimated enemy air losses at 165, of which seventy-five per cent were German.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck also listed the reinforcements sent to Eighth Army since the beginning of the battle. They totalled 25,000 men, seventy-eight field guns, 220 anti-tank guns and 353 tanks.

As he studied the casualty figures, the Prime Minister was struck by the disproportion between killed and wounded on the one hand and prisoners on the other, and came to the conclusion that 'something must have happened of an unpleasant character'. He did not, he said, dwell on this in his reply.<sup>2</sup>

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

11 June 1942

Many thanks for your facts and figures. They seem to me quite good. Although of course one hopes for success by manoeuvre or counter-stroke, nevertheless we have no reason to fear a prolonged *bataille d'usure*. This must wear down Rommel worse than Ritchie because of our superior communications. More especially is this true in view of what is coming towards you as fast as ships can steam. Recovery work is most encouraging, and reflects credit on all concerned. Please give my compliments to Ritchie and tell him how much his dogged and resolute fighting is admired by the vast audience which follows every move from day to day.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

11 June 1942

Thank you for your most encouraging and understanding telegram. . . .

Our losses have been heavy, and I am afraid in one engagement avoidably so, but as you say, our resources are greater than his and his situation is not enviable.

I have passed your message to General Ritchie who will, I know, be deeply gratified by it.

\* \* \*

By June 10-11 Ritchie not only had lost the initiative: he had no grasp on the battle as a whole or in detail. The Commander-

<sup>1</sup> Kesselring and Rommel had what Kesselring called 'a difference of opinion'—Rommel was more outspoken—over these losses. They were mainly Stukas shot down over Bir Hacheim. Kesselring wanted Rommel to send his armour in against the fortress. Rommel preferred to sacrifice Stukas.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 327.

in-Chief in Cairo, the Chiefs of Staff and the Prime Minister in London, could perceive with greater clarity than the Commander of Eighth Army what had happened in his own field of operations, and could apprehend more sharply the danger in which he stood.

Generals are rarely objects of pity. Yet Ritchie at this time, in the isolation which he had brought upon himself, partly through inexperience, partly as a result of his combining slowness of mind with a buoyantly optimistic temperament, was to be pitied rather than condemned. For his disregard of Auchinleck's advice Eighth Army had paid a heavy penalty; but Ritchie was not yet aware even that it was a penalty. He was a game loser, because he did not comprehend that he was losing. This was becoming disquietingly apparent to Auchinleck.

On June 11 Whiteley, Ritchie's B.G.S., wrote to the Commander-in-Chief:

Your signal of June 11 arrived just before breakfast this morning. General Neil had arranged to go forward to see the corps commanders, leaving here at nine o'clock. He dictated some notes to me before he went and in the short time available I have tried to put them in the best form that I can. I thought it would be better to give you the material in a somewhat disjointed form by today's L.O. rather than to delay an answer.

General Neil thinks that you are not in touch quite with our picture and suggests that you send up a senior staff officer tomorrow if you can manage to do so.

I have not even had time to check it.

Whiteley had done his best with his notes; but the document which he enclosed by no means satisfied the Commander-in-Chief. His marginal comments were numerous, incisive and critical.

Ritchie began with an estimate of Rommel's strength and his own: 'I consider that our armour and the enemy armour is very evenly balanced. It is probable that our armour reinforcements are slightly in excess of those of the enemy.'

Auchinleck underlined *slightly* and noted in the margin: 'Ours, 330; 270 with units 10/6. Enemy 200-250 ??; G=220 ? I=60 ? Total 280.'

Ritchie estimated that Rommel had ten and a half infantry brigade groups, and that he himself had 'the equivalent of ten brigade groups'. To 5th Indian Division he allotted in his statement of strength one brigade group. Auchinleck's marginal note, which read '9 and 10 Bdes ?' threw—and even at this distance of time still

throws—a harsh and searching light on the paucity of information that had been passed to G.H.Q. On the evening of June 11 the Commander-in-Chief had still not been told of the fate which had befallen these two brigades five and six days before.

Churchill's comment, 'Cairo Headquarters were in important respects unable to measure the event',<sup>1</sup> was accurate in the terms of 10-11 June 1942. But when Churchill wrote these words in 1950, the cause of G.H.Q.'s inability to measure the event had long since been discoverable; and of that cause Churchill made no mention.

Ritchie's appreciation laboured on. His assessment of the relative strengths of Eighth Army and Panzer Army led him to the conclusion: 'Our forces are very evenly balanced with those of the enemy and we must place our reliance more upon moral factors than material.' Auchinleck simply noted: 'Tanks?'

Ritchie's maintenance arrangements, which he set out in detail, won the comment, 'All good'. But when he came to weigh up Rommel's probable courses of action he met sledgehammer criticism once more.

'I consider,' said Ritchie, 'that the enemy is aiming at strengthening his position in the Cauldron with a view to passing to the offensive as soon as possible. In the meantime he hopes that we will attack him in what is a strong position.'

*Auchinleck* (in the margin): Oh? ?

*Ritchie*: If we do not do this I consider that he will either: (a) strike north, with a view to isolating the two divisions of 13th Corps on the Gazala position, or (b) strike east against our communications.

*Auchinleck*: (c) Go away, (d) Stay put, if he expects reinforcements.

*Ritchie*: There are local indications that his intention is to strike east and, in my opinion, this is the more probable course.

*Auchinleck*: What are they?

*Ritchie*: The enemy's L. of C. is precarious. Since we have started harassing them west of the mine-field he has been forced to conform to the extent of air action and withdrawing troops and anti-tank guns.

*Auchinleck*: Confirmed? To what extent?

Ritchie turned to the courses open to himself. 'My aim,' he began, 'is to destroy the enemy armoured forces.'

*Auchinleck* (ring round the word *armoured*, red pencil for comment): ? Army?

Ritchie rejected—and in the light of the fate which had befallen 'Aberdeen' he would have been insane not to reject—the idea of a

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 327.

direct attack on the Cauldron, either as before or from the west. His plan, he said, was to attack Rommel's line of communication, which was his main vulnerable point. 'If necessary, I am prepared to go wide to the west to get my target.'

*Auchinleck*: What is the target?

*Ritchie*: My plan is to attack his L. of C. . . . (a) from the north on 50th Div. front. Valentine tanks will be used to support these attacks; (b) from the south with a motor brigade group and with such armour as I can spare from the Arena area, without endangering security. At the moment I estimate this to be approximately thirty Stuart type tanks.

*Auchinleck*: A Piddle?

*Ritchie*: In this way I hope to force the enemy to conform either by attacking me or by withdrawing troops from the Cauldron area to protect his L. of C.

*Auchinleck* (underlining *me*): ? Knightsbridge. What decision does this lead to?

Auchinleck had sent Ritchie two telegrams on June 10 and 11,<sup>1</sup> to which the Army Commander supplied answers in a further series of notes dictated to Whiteley. Auchinleck made his marginal observations on this document.

*Ritchie*: Our forces which are harassing the enemy east and west of the mine-field are under brigade and divisional control. The arrangements are: (a) 7th Armoured Division controls columns working in the area south-west of El Adem. It also controls through 7th Motor Brigade action from the south against the enemy L. of C. west of the mine-field; (b) 50th Division control the action of columns acting against the enemy L. of C. from the north, but it does this through H.Q. 69th Brigade.

*Auchinleck*: No real command here.

*Ritchie*: Steps have already been taken to improve the Knightsbridge locality. An additional battalion has been included in an extension of it and mine-field spurs are to be laid to the south and to the west. I do not consider that it is wise to lay mine-fields which cannot be covered by field artillery fire. . . . I must leave a gap in order not to restrict too fully the mobility of my armour. I have not got the infantry resources to cover by fire a continuous mine-field connecting the 69th Brigade area with Knightsbridge. I am forced to rely on armour as my main means of protection in this area.

*Auchinleck*: This is not logical. What about the armour?

*Ritchie*: My armoured forces are, therefore, disposed around

<sup>1</sup> No copies of which are in the Auchinleck papers.

Knightsbridge so as to be able to strike the enemy should he advance north or south or both.

*Auchinleck* (underlining *south*): Or *east*?

*Ritchie*: With regard to the establishment of defended localities our experience has been that unless they can be made very strong it is a hostage to fortune to place garrisons in them. Practically all my infantry are now disposed on the ground in static positions.

*Auchinleck*: Means?

*Ritchie*: In my opinion Hacheim was becoming an expensive detachment. The French brigade group of considerable size and very strong in anti-tank weapons failed to secure it. . . . I was being forced to use a motor brigade group, a regiment of armour and the mobile portion of 29th Infantry Brigade to keep the passage open. . . .

*Auchinleck*: Were they driven out of it?

*Ritchie*: Our withdrawal from Hacheim releases enemy forces but I think it releases more of ours.

*Auchinleck*: Enemy air forces, also tanks?

*Ritchie*: Any appreciable armoured force, e.g. an armoured division which I may want to operate west of the mine-field, will probably be maintained through 50th Division's front. It may however not be beyond my resources to maintain them from the south, if this should prove to be the best route, which I doubt.

*Auchinleck*: Never said this before.

General Neil's feeling that the Commander-in-Chief was 'not quite in touch' with Eighth Army's views of the battle was correct, though not perhaps for quite the reasons that General Neil imagined. Auchinleck did not send up a senior staff officer on June 12. He went up himself.

\* \* \*

Rommel's reaction to the evacuation of Bir Hacheim was, as Auchinleck said in his despatch, 'immediate and determined'. Rommel himself wrote:

Now our forces were free. . . . On the afternoon of June 11, I put the Bir Hacheim force on the move to the north in order to seek a final decision without further delay.<sup>1</sup>

How was he going to seek that decision? At nightfall on June 11 Eighth Army's principal forces which were to be engaged in the

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 220.

forthcoming battle were disposed as follows: 1st Armoured Division H.Q., with 22nd Armoured Brigade and the 2nd Battalion the Scots Guards were on Rigel Ridge, astride the Trigh Bir Hacheim, some four miles to the south of Knightsbridge; 2nd Armoured Brigade moved down from the ridge south-eastwards across the Trigh Capuzzo; 201st Guards Brigade were in the Knightsbridge 'box', and 4th Armoured Brigade lay to the south-east in protection of the left flank of the 'box'; fifteen miles to the eastward, and just south of the road was 29th Indian Infantry Brigade holding the El Adem 'box'; 7th Armoured Division H.Q. were on the ridge to the east of the 'box'.

The Axis interceptions of British wireless communications were of great value to Rommel at this phase of the battle. He had a thorough knowledge of all these dispositions, and a clearer idea of the British Commander's intentions than some of the subordinate British formations. His orders on the afternoon of June 11 were, therefore, to the 15th Panzer Division and the two motorized divisions, 90th Light and Trieste, to advance north-east towards El Adem, while 21st Panzer would demonstrate against the British forces hemming in the Cauldron on the north.

'It seemed as if,' said Auchinleck in his despatch, 'the orders of May 27 had been issued again.' Von Mellenthin frankly admitted that it was 'really a reversion to the original plan of May 27' and that 'it would not have succeeded if the British command had not made serious mistakes'.<sup>1</sup>

In the evening 15th Panzer Division had a brief and inconclusive brush with 4th Armoured Brigade, south-east of the Knightsbridge 'box'; and the Axis intercept service reported that '4th Armoured Brigade has refused to carry out an attack to the south-east'. This intercept, though it was a most inaccurate as well as uncharitable interpretation of the British brigade commander's reaction to his orders,<sup>2</sup> had a fateful influence on the course of the battle. Rommel,

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 107. Rommel made no such admission.

<sup>2</sup> Messervy, commanding 7th Armoured Division, sent a personal note to the commander of 4th Armoured Brigade early on the morning of June 11 saying, 'In my opinion, the next most probable move by the enemy would be from the mine marsh north of Hacheim direct on to El Adem and thence on to cut off Tobruk from the east.' He ordered 4th Armoured Brigade, if this happened, to move *without delay* south-east and engage the enemy. 'That afternoon,' Messervy wrote, 'the very move I had foreseen took place, and 4th Armoured Brigade moved south-east, though slower than I had hoped, and had a distant and inconclusive engagement with an equal number of enemy tanks until last light.'

said von Mellenthin, was 'delighted to hear that the British were contemplating such a move', and immediately 'ordered 15th Panzer to stand on the defensive on June 12, while 21st Panzer advanced south of the Knightsbridge "box" to take the British armour in the rear'.<sup>1</sup>

The battle on June 12 opened slowly in a yellow-grey sand-haze. Since no British attack developed,<sup>2</sup> General Nehring—now commanding Afrika Korps—ordered 15th Panzer to attack. The assault at the beginning was 'both hesitant and diffused', because the German tank-crews were tired and strained. Such initiative as there was, was shown by the German anti-tank gunners, who took advantage of the haze to wreak a good deal of damage on the British tanks.

As 15th Panzer Division's attack on 4th and 2nd Armoured Brigades developed from the south-east, Rommel saw and seized his chance. At noon he issued urgent orders to 21st Panzer Division to strike in from the north. This they did with great success, and the British brigades were, as Rommel put it, 'squeezed between the two German panzer divisions'. Since Messervy, at the bottom of his well, was temporarily unavailable, Norrie put 4th and 2nd Brigades, and 22nd Armoured Brigade as well, under Lumsden, the commander of 1st Armoured Division. 22nd Armoured Brigade hurried south from the Rigel Ridge and suffered heavy losses at the hands of 21st Panzer and Trieste Divisions.

Lumsden wanted to consolidate around the Knightsbridge 'box', but Norrie ordered the armour to continue to 'advance' southwards, with the intention of destroying the enemy armour. At 15.30 another

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Largely because of confusion. Messervy early in the morning of the 12th crossed the Trigh el Capuzzo for a consultation with his two brigadiers—2nd and 4th Armd Bdes—whom he desired to advance southwards to Bir el Gubi in order to 'regain the open desert and be free to operate against the enemy south flank'. A footnote in von Mellenthin's book says that there was a 'serious dispute' between Messervy and the two brigadiers, who were opposed to the advance. Messervy in his report did not mention any dispute, but said, 'I realized the serious implications of this plan, which would split our armour and weaken the support to 1st S.A. Div. and 50th Div. in the north. I felt it was a decision which would have to be sanctioned by the Army commander.' He therefore set off for his own H.Q., having ordered the brigadiers to prepare for the attack, but not to move till they received the executive order from him. On his journey he 'ran into a Boche column on El Adem aerodrome' and had to make a wide detour by way of Tobruk. He was once more nearly a prisoner, this time of 90th Light, and had for a time to take refuge at the bottom of a dry well. Once more command broke down, and disaster followed.



heavy Axis assault was made, and 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades began to give way. In the sunset 4th Armoured Brigade's retreat became a rout as they were driven headlong down the escarpment north-east of Knightsbridge, abandoning all the tanks which were on tow. 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades withdrew towards the Knightsbridge 'box', still hotly pressed by the panzers; and a fierce and bitter fight raged until dark.

This was the day of final decision in the Battle of Gazala. When dusk came the British armoured forces were but a shadow of what they had been. In all, about 120 tanks had been lost—their burned-out wreckage strewn the battlefield—and the tactical situation was irreparably worse than it had been twenty-four hours earlier. The Axis armour had broken through the main line of defence covering the road between Gazala and Tobruk, and several miles of the escarpment between Knightsbridge and El Adem were under their control. The El Adem 'box' was badly isolated; Knightsbridge was left at the head of a pronounced salient. Rommel had dislocated the British defensive system and cut the Axis By-Pass Road, thus forcing all future communications with the east, including the retreat of the Gazala garrison, to pass through the congested area of Tobruk. From his position on the escarpment he now had direct observation of the British dispositions as far as the perimeter of the fortress.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

On this black day Auchinleck flew up to Eighth Army H.Q. from Cairo. But nobody there had any idea how black it was. The South African Official History says that the Headquarters was 'in a tranquil frame of mind, as usual'. Auchinleck stayed with Ritchie overnight, and signalled to the C.I.G.S.:

Atmosphere here good. No undue optimism and realities of situation are being faced calmly and resolutely. Morale of troops appears excellent.

He returned to Cairo on June 13, and that evening wrote the following letter, which was despatched at once:

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

13 June 1942

I send this by hand of Davy<sup>2</sup> who will explain why he has come.

The General Staff here in my absence have, quite rightly, been

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Brig. G. M. O. Davy, Director of Military Operations at G.H.Q.

considering the 'worst possible case' which is the defeat of your army and the consequent need for holding the frontier position as a rallying point. They are not in the least defeatist and you know that I am not. But it is their business to plan for all possible contingencies as, of course, you know.

Anyway, I am getting down 10th Corps H.Q. which I propose to put in charge of the area Sollum-Matruh-Maddalena, so as to have an H.Q. there which can give its unhindered attention to the problem of the defence of this area, should it ever have to be defended.

I am also getting down the N.Z. Div. as soon as I can.

I wonder whether you would wish to retain command of the frontier area, or whether you would like G.H.Q. to relieve you of it and so leave you freer possibly to control your forward battle. I feel there are many factors known to you and unknown to us which affect this question, and I will be glad, therefore, if you will give me your considered opinion by Davy, who will, I hope, be able to get back tomorrow night.

I see the enemy did not move much this morning. I had a quiet trip back. . . .

It was grand seeing you. Good luck.

\* \* \*

June 13 clinched Rommel's victory for him. The two German panzer divisions advanced against the Scots Guards (who had the support of South African field and anti-tank artillery) on Rigel Ridge. The infantry and the gunners put up a stubborn resistance which it took the German armour some time to beat down, but by the afternoon the ridge was taken, and the slaughter of British tanks went on. Rommel wrote:

One after the other of the 120 or so which they probably now had left remained lying on the battlefield. A murderous fire struck from several sides into the tightly packed British formations, whose strength gradually diminished. Their counter-attacks steadily decreased in momentum.<sup>1</sup>

On the night of June 13-14 the Guards Brigade evacuated Knightsbridge; and Rommel, recording this, paid them a significant tribute:

This brigade was almost a living embodiment of the virtues and

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 221.

faults of the British soldier—tremendous courage and tenacity combined with a rigid lack of mobility.<sup>1</sup>

At last the serene optimism which had so long prevailed at Eighth Army H.Q. was beginning to be shaken. Ritchie, the unquenchable optimist, perceived the spectral outlines of defeat. He, who three weeks before had been so cheerfully confident of victory, had now to contemplate the annihilation of almost all his armour, and the possible defeat and destruction of all that remained of his army.

Yet the habits of many months could not be abandoned in a moment—and not all of them were bad habits, though many unhappy consequences had flowed from them. Ritchie could still, even in this stark crisis, make the strange, forlorn assertion—and Auchinleck could repeat it to London—that the results of the armoured battles had been 'inconclusive', though the British tank strength was now relatively weaker than before compared with that of Panzer Army.

But in the same telegram, sent out on the evening of June 13, the Commander-in-Chief went on to say that Ritchie was feeling concern lest the German armour should be able to strike north to Acroma and cut off the divisions—1st South African and 50th Infantry—in the Gazala Line. Ritchie's problem, therefore, was whether to withdraw these two divisions, which would in his view entail the withdrawal of the whole of Eighth Army to the frontier position or whether they should stay and fight it out where they were.

Auchinleck, who had himself only returned from Eighth Army H.Q. that day, assessed the situation as it had been presented to him. He decided in favour of giving battle on the line of positions running from the Gazala Line to El Adem, and told London what he had done.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck* 13 June 1942. 23.15 hrs.

Your decision to fight it out to the end most cordially endorsed. We shall sustain you whatever the result. Retreat would be fatal. This is a business not only of armour but of will-power. God bless you all.

The cipher officer in Cairo made only two copies of this telegram. He noted on the top copy the time at which it was decoded and typed. This was 04.35 hours on the morning of June 14. To what extent could this signal, and the Commander-in-Chief's order, of which it was an endorsement, now influence the course of events in the field?

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Rommel Takes Tobruk

JUNE 14 was a day of acute and complex crisis. Ritchie decided early in the morning that the Gazala Line was to be evacuated. He made this decision under the pressure of the tactical factors as he saw them then. But it was in flat disregard of the orders which Auchinleck had given him on the previous day, which had during the night received the full support of the Prime Minister, the C.I.G.S. and the War Cabinet. Ritchie was not cognizant of this support, but he had his orders.

At 07.00 hours he arranged with Gott, commanding 13th Corps, to withdraw 1st South African and 50th Divisions. Orders to this effect were issued verbally to Corps H.Q. A little before 09.00 hours Ritchie went to the Headquarters of 2nd South African Division in Tobruk and had a telephone conversation with Auchinleck, of which there was no written record. The South African Official History has described it as 'guarded and obscure'. But Ritchie made it clear enough to Auchinleck that he had perceived that the battle of the past two days had gone against Eighth Army, that the Guards Brigade had evacuated Knightsbridge, and that he could no longer hold the Gazala Line and must withdraw. Auchinleck told him to hang on if humanly possible without risking the whole situation, and said that he would send Davy up by air to see the situation on the spot and report back that afternoon.

At 10.20 hours Ritchie issued formal orders to Gott covering the withdrawal to the Frontier of 1st South African and 50th Divisions, which had in fact already been initiated by Gott. At the same time 1st Armoured Division H.Q. and 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades were all ordered back to the Frontier. Neither Ritchie or anyone on his staff, nor Gott, was capable of realizing that these orders were bound to mean that either Tobruk would be isolated in the middle of enemy-held territory, or it would have to be evacuated. Nor was there, on the part of Eighth Army, any attempt to anticipate Rommel's intentions. His November plan for the capture of Tobruk, which had been shown to Eric Dorman-Smith in G.H.Q. in Cairo

as a museum piece, was now, six and a half months later, to be put into action.

Ritchie sent a signal to G.H.Q. He emphasized the steady wastage of British armour and the consequent impossibility of holding the line running from 69th Brigade's position in the Gazala Line to Acroma.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck* 14 June 1942. 10.30 hrs.

In circumstances there is in my opinion no alternative but to draw out 1st S.A. and 50th Divs if possible as I cannot foresee any prospect of so building up my armour as to be able to restore these L. of C. within a week, by which time their reserves will be exhausted. I have, therefore, ordered General Gott to withdraw these formations into Army Reserve while at the same time I will (a) occupy frontier positions while (b) building up as strong an armoured and infantry force as possible in the desert west of the Frontier. This force will be responsible for harrying enemy southern flank and as soon as it is practicable undertaking an offensive against the enemy. I hope initially to be able to stand on position western perimeter Tobruk-El Adem-Belhamed with mobile forces operating from Desert to the south and so ensure keeping L. of C. to Tobruk closed, though I do not consider the enemy with his present strength can closely invest the place. Tobruk has a month's supplies and I believe we can restore the situation within that period and thereby save all the installations there. The alternatives therefore are (a) to accept a risk of temporary investment in Tobruk or (b) to go the whole hog, give up Tobruk and withdraw to the Frontier. I am at any rate clearing all non-essentials out of Tobruk and making preparations for demolitions. Do you agree to me accepting the risk of investment in Tobruk?

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie* 14 June 1942. 11.15 hrs.

Even if you have to evacuate Gazala you should hold Acroma, El Adem and to the south, while I build up reinforcements on the Frontier. . . . Are you able to do this?

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie* 14 June 1942. 11.30 hrs.

1. If in your opinion situation has so deteriorated that you can no longer leave 1st S.A. and 50th Divs in main Gazala position without certain risk of their being cut off and isolated, then I agree to their withdrawal, undesirable as this is in view of tactical advantage this bastion gives us.

2. While I realize that our armoured forces have been

defeated and are now weaker in quantity as well as quality than those of enemy, I must stress my opinion that the enemy, who so far has won all his successes with two German armd and one German motor divs, helped to some extent by one Italian motor div., cannot really be in position to carry out large-scale offensive operations for indefinite period at pace he has been doing. He must, I feel, have lost heavily, and we know his ammunition is short. Moreover we are definitely superior to him in the air.

3. This being so, Tobruk must be held and the enemy must not be allowed to invest it. This means that Eighth Army must hold the line Acroma-El Adem and southwards and resist all enemy attempts to pass it. Having reduced your front by evacuating Gazala and reorganized your forces, this should be feasible, and I order you to do it.

4. If you feel you cannot accept the responsibility of holding this position you must say so.

These two signals were perfectly clear. So was the reasoning behind them. Auchinleck was convinced that the Panzer Army was at or very near the end of its tether. He was right, as subsequent examination of the Axis war diaries was to prove. He knew too that Tobruk was in no state to stand a formal siege. He therefore ordered Eighth Army, which included the forces withdrawn from Gazala, to concentrate some twelve miles to the east, in defence of the area Acroma-El Adem and southwards. Implicit in this order was the retention of Tobruk. His intention was to hold Tobruk, but to prevent it from being besieged. The last two sentences of the signal contained a definite order and a request to Ritchie to give a specific assurance of his compliance with that order.

Ritchie conferred with Gott, whose influence over him was by no means small. Their discussion was lengthy. Gott impressed upon Ritchie his own view that if Tobruk were to be held at all, it was bound to be invested; he said that there was no need to lose all Tobruk's installations and supplies, and asserted that the fortress could hold out without any difficulty for two months. He persuaded Ritchie to accept these opinions and himself set about preparing for the siege.

Across these discussions and preparations cut Auchinleck's formal orders.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

*14 June 1942. 19.50 hrs.*

*Intention: To destroy the enemy forces in Cyrenaica. . . .*

*Method: To deny the general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi . . .*

our mobile forces should therefore attack the enemy wherever met from now on, bearing in mind that our tanks should be husbanded as a reserve of striking power and, therefore, should not engage enemy tanks unless at great advantage. . . . The defences of Tobruk and other strong places will be used as pivots of manœuvre but on no account will any part of Eighth Army be allowed to be surrounded in Tobruk and invested there. . . .

I am creating for you a strong and mobile reserve in the area Sollum-Maddalena for a powerful counter-offensive at the earliest moment.

To sum up:

(a) The general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi is to be denied to the enemy.

(b) Our forces will NOT be invested in Tobruk and your army is to remain a mobile field army.

(c) The enemy's forces are to be attacked and destroyed as soon as we have collected adequate forces for an offensive.

This telegram crossed one from Eighth Army answering the Commander-in-Chief's signal of 11.30 hours.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck* 14 June 1942. 20.00 hrs.

I agree that the enemy is not in a position to carry out large-scale offensive at pace he has been doing. It is for this reason that I have ordered Eighth Army to deny to the enemy the western and southern perimeter of Tobruk, the Tobruk-El Adem road and El Adem, and to the south. . . .

Acroma and Pt 187 and Pt 209 have been heavily attacked all day. The garrison and 1st Armoured Division are fighting magnificently to hold their positions. . . . The enemy are reported to have sixty to eighty German and sixty Italian tanks in this attack.

I consider that Acroma is not vital when the troops in the bastion (Gazala-Alem Hamza) have been withdrawn. That is why I chose the western perimeter of Tobruk as the position to be held. . . .

My immediate intention is to give all I can to strengthen 7th Armoured Division in guns and anti-tank weapons by collecting under them all available motorized units and armour for employment on our southern flank. . . .

This reorganization will inevitably take a few days and I cannot guarantee that the enemy will allow me this time. If he does not and if he overcomes my forces and gets astride the eastern heights

from Tobruk, I will be faced with a decision to allow Tobruk to be invested or to order the garrison to fight its way out. The garrison probably could fight its way out, but it would undoubtedly lose a considerable amount of equipment and transport and arrive on the Frontier in a disorganized condition. Having regard to resources of ammunition, food and water now in Tobruk and in ships in Tobruk, I feel confident that it could hold out for two months on its own resources.

The policy which I recommend, therefore, with all my conviction is:

- (a) To fight alongside Tobruk and to prevent it being invested.
- (b) If I fail, to allow Tobruk to be invested rather than to order the garrison to fight its way out in difficult circumstances. Reference para. 4 of your signal. If this is a correct interpretation of your orders, I accept responsibility.

\* \* \*

On the Axis side, Rommel had the smell of victory in his nostrils. He was as eager to cut off the two divisions in the Gazala Line as Ritchie and Gott were to get them out. Early on the morning of June 14 the two panzer divisions moved off the battlefield strewn with so much British armour and, as Rommel put it, 'rolled northwards'. Rommel ordered full speed, because the Axis Intelligence knew that the British retreat was on, and that vehicles, in their hundreds if not (as Rommel claimed) in their thousands, were hurrying eastwards along the Via Balbia. Rommel rode with the tanks, constantly urging their commanders to keep their speed up.

Suddenly we ran into a wide belt of mines. Ritchie had attempted to form a new defence front and had put in every tank he had. The advance was halted and our vehicles were showered with British armour-piercing shells.<sup>1</sup>

The survivors of 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades, some British and South African artillery, the 1st Battalion the Worcesters, and a composite South African battalion held up the panzer divisions throughout the greater part of a hard-fought day. At nightfall the Axis forces had not reached the Via Balbia, in spite of all Rommel's

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 222.



urging and exhortations. They had been fought to a standstill, and when the darkness came the exhausted crews flopped down and slept beside their tanks near Acroma, with nothing between them and the traffic-congested Via Balbia.

During the night of June 14-15 50th Division moved west and then south from the Gazala Line, and 1st South African Division escaped down the road to the east, and the noise and the confusion of their going—and that of the remnants of other units—did not disturb the sleeping Germans.

On both sides the intuition of the Commanders-in-Chief was justified. Rommel was right in believing that if he had been able to whip and prod and jerk his tired men into one more action he could have shattered a large part of Eighth Army in its pell-mell rush to the Frontier. And Auchinleck was right in believing that the Axis forces were at their last gasp.

\* \* \*

Auchinleck's new D.C.G.S., Major-General Eric Dorman-Smith, was the elder brother of Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, the Governor of Burma at the time of the Japanese attack. Sir Reginald, having reached India in the final stages of the British withdrawal, was summoned to London to report. He arrived in Cairo on his way home on Saturday, June 13, and met his brother, who told him that the Commander-in-Chief had asked him to luncheon at his house on Sunday. The invitation was gladly accepted.

Those present at the luncheon were Auchinleck, Corbett, Eric Dorman-Smith and Colonel (later Major-General) W. E. V. Abraham. Reginald Dorman-Smith was aware that the situation in the Western Desert was critical, but he detected no signs of alarm or despondency in the Commander-in-Chief or his officers. Recent and bleak experience had taught the Governor of Burma to recognize the reactions of men under the stress of defeat. He was aware of no defeat in that party.

After luncheon Auchinleck suggested that Eric Dorman-Smith might like to give his brother a full picture of what was happening by showing him the Map Room. Sir Reginald's account of this episode continued:

We went. He gave me a brilliant appreciation of the then somewhat tricky situation. He demonstrated the various shortages of men and machines which plagued them. He also said that Rommel had imposed his mind so much on Ritchie . . . that Rommel

would always come out on the winning side against Ritchie. I asked him why the Auk did not get rid of Ritchie. He replied that the Auk was not very partial to sacking people. He had sacked Cunningham and that was about the end of his sacking ration. My brother shook me. He asked me to tell Whitehall about all this and to try, if opportunity arose, to impress them with the crying needs of the Auk's forces. I asked him—bluntly—whether he thought that Rommel would get to Cairo. He considered his answer and—after a pause—said, 'Provided the Auk accepts the plan which I am putting up to him we can tie Rommel up into knots, but we cannot stage an all-out offensive unless and until we have more men and machines.' Thinking of the troops whom I had seen in Burma in defeat, I suggested that some of their fighting men must be pretty tired, if not slightly despondent. He agreed but said, 'Their tails will get right up once they know that we can defeat Rommel, which we will do if Auk listens to me.'

I departed. . . . I did tell the whole story to Amery, whom I regarded as a friend. What he did with the information I do not know.

\* \* \*

In London the Prime Minister was beginning to make preparations for a visit to Washington. He considered that the President was 'getting a little off the rails, and some good talks as regards Western Front were required'. On June 13 he telephoned the C.I.G.S. and asked him to join the party. On the Sunday morning Brooke went to his home in the country, hoping for a quiet day of rest. Brooke recorded in his diary:

. . . Many calls from the P.M. who was much disturbed at bad turn taken by operations in the Middle East. Rommel certainly seems to be getting the better of Ritchie and is out-generalling him.<sup>1</sup>

The Prime Minister was quite right to be anxious about the course of the battle in the Western Desert. But his anxiety found a focus in Tobruk, which took on for him an emotional and political significance unconnected with its military importance. He saw it as another Singapore, the loss of which would produce equally catastrophic consequences. He over-estimated the value of Tobruk, and he underestimated the quality of his Commander-in-Chief, Auchinleck.

The following telegram from Richard Casey in Cairo might have

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 397.

helped him to clarify his mind and subdue his somewhat turbulent emotions (but there is no indication that it did):

*Minister of State to Prime Minister*

14 June 1942

You know the serious stage that the Western Desert battle has reached. Auchinleck spent twenty-four hours with Ritchie, returning late yesterday, June 13. It has been agreed that Acroma-El Adem should be held, and Auchinleck has sent Ritchie an order to that effect. The 1st South African Division and 50th Division are being withdrawn from the Gazala positions. I have kept in close touch with Commanders-in-Chief and with the varying tides in the battle area, and with the reinforcements that have been sent and are being sent forward.

As to Auchinleck himself, I have all possible confidence in him as regards his leadership and the way he is conducting the battle with the forces that are available to him. My only wish is that he could be at two places at once, both here at the centre of the web and forward directing the Eighth Army battle in person. I have even thought at times in recent days that it would be a good thing for him to go forward and take charge of the battle, leaving the C.G.S. here temporarily in charge, but he does not think so and I do not want to press him on it. It is Auchinleck's battle, and decisions as to leadership subordinate to himself are for him to make.

The Royal Air Force under Tedder are doing well, and I believe it right to say that we have air superiority in the battle area. The outcome of the two convoys to Malta rests on today and tomorrow. The Western Desert will undoubtedly help the west-bound convoy from the air point of view. The greater danger to the west-bound convoy tomorrow will be from surface vessels of the Italian Fleet.<sup>1</sup>

Late on the evening of that long, momentous Sunday Auchinleck held a conference in the War Room at G.H.Q. in Cairo. There were present Corbett, the C.G.S., Dorman-Smith, the D.C.G.S., and de Guingand, the D.M.I. A telegram was delivered to the Commander-in-Chief:

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

14 June 1942

To what position does Ritchie want to withdraw the Gazala

<sup>1</sup> In fact during June 14 most of the Luftwaffe were busy attacking the west-bound convoy, and 1st South African Division on the road east from Gazala were relatively free from dive-bombing.

troops? Presume there is no question in any case of giving up Tobruk. As long as Tobruk is held no serious enemy advance into Egypt is possible. We went through all this in April 1941. Do not understand what you mean by withdrawing to 'old frontier'.

Am very glad you are bringing New Zealand Division into the Western Desert. Let me know dates when it can be deployed and where.

C.I.G.S. agrees with all this. Please keep us informed.

Into a clear-cut and definite, if difficult, military situation, already provided for in detail, came this imperious message from Churchill, dictated two thousand miles away in London, and a whole year out of date. For June 1942 was not April 1941, and the military situation, both tactically and strategically, was quite different.

One at least of the officers in the War Room thought privately that the right course would have been to tell the Prime Minister to go to blazes, and to go on with the operation in accordance with the orders issued to Ritchie earlier that evening. But they were four men bound by a lifetime of discipline. Auchinleck had endured eleven months of the Prime Minister's supervision and remote control. The situation, he knew, was by no means irretrievable. If Rommel could be held east of the general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi, and if this could be stabilized, then Tobruk need not be evacuated. Nobody in that room knew then that Gott, with Ritchie's compliance, was already beginning to prepare Tobruk for a siege; any such idea would have been promptly discounted.

At 20.45 hours Auchinleck sent off a signal.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

*14 June 1942*

I hope El Adem has successfully resisted attacks today. If El Adem still holds, its area should be reinforced without delay so as to ensure that Tobruk is defended without being invested. Grateful for early information of changes in situation at El Adem.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck*

*14 June 1942. 23.59 hrs.*

El Adem supported by 7th Motor Brigade and Mobile Group of 11th Indian Brigade beat off three attacks today and drove enemy back inflicting considerable losses. R.A.F. gave most effective and unstinted support.

Elements of 50th Division have arrived at Maddalena and give as their impression that three-quarters of division is coming through.

1st S.A. Div. has passed east of Gambut and is in good condition. Details in about two days. The rear elements passed into Tobruk

early this morning just as enemy shelling from escarpment became intense. Situation only made possible by very fine fight put up by 1st Armoured Division and garrisons of posts yesterday against very superior numbers.

Armour on southern flank is being built up from every available source and I am hopeful of having something appreciable there by morning June 17 but I do not want to commit myself to figures.

Order for Tobruk to be closed as port issued today.

The South African official historians have drawn attention in temperate but well-weighed terms, to the misleading optimism and the factual inaccuracy of this signal. The 'Mobile Group of 11th Indian Brigade' consisted of two little columns—a troop of guns and a platoon of infantry in each—which were recalled to the brigade next day. 50th Division, having already lost 150th Brigade, suffered heavily in the break-out and the survivors were thoroughly disorganized. The rear elements of 1st South African Division did not pass into Tobruk, but were captured near Mrassas, and the last of those who were lucky got in during the afternoon and not in the early morning.<sup>1</sup>

The reference to 'armour on southern flank' was meaningless. Ritchie was in fact breaking up the remnants of 1st Armoured Division and putting them into 4th Armoured Brigade, to keep that formation in being. This was all the armour he had, and it was north-east of El Adem and not on the southern flank.

If this signal had given a true picture of the situation at that moment, it might have helped the Commander-in-Chief and his staff officers in their conference. However, it blurred, if it did not completely disguise, the fact that while he in the most explicit and determined manner was pressing for vigorous defensive action with all available force concentrated on the Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi line, the Commander of Eighth Army had already adopted a policy of flight and dispersion, which was bound to leave Tobruk isolated.

The discussion in the War Room was nevertheless a long one. At 01.30 on the morning of June 15 Dorman-Smith felt that it might be possible to bring it to a head. He asked Auchinleck whether it was his intention, first, that Tobruk should not on any account be isolated, and second, that Rommel must be held east of the general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi. The Commander-in-Chief answered that this was his intention, and that early in the morning he (Dorman-Smith) was to take this order to Ritchie.

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 102.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie* 15 June 1942 07.45 hrs.

You have done well in getting 1st S.A. Division out so successfully and hope that you will be equally successful with 50th Division. Your army is now reasonably concentrated and it is most essential that you should use this advantage at once by bringing maximum force into play in El Adem area. Realize that troops may be tired and disorganized but the enemy is probably more so and these considerations must NOT interfere with the concentration by you of all available force at the decisive spot which is El Adem in my opinion. I look to you to spare nothing to achieve this. We must emulate the enemy's speed in thought and action and I wish you to impress this as strongly as possible on ALL commanders.

The South African official historians detected in this message 'a distinct strain of disappointment, perhaps dissatisfaction, at the half-hearted strategy and uncertain tactical handling which had brought the Eighth Army to such a dangerous pass'. This was a correct analysis of Auchinleck's emotions at this moment; but it must be realized that those emotions would have been a good deal more sharply edged, and would have produced much more quickly conclusive results, had the Commander-in-Chief known the whole truth.

A quarter of an hour before this telegram was sent, Corbett telephoned Dorman-Smith. He told him that Auchinleck had decided that, in view of the definite character of the order and the difference in acting rank between the Army Commander and the D.C.G.S., he (Corbett) should take the order up to Ritchie.

At 11.35 hours a signal was sent from G.H.Q. to London.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister* 15 June 1942

Have ordered General Ritchie to deny to the enemy general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi. This does NOT mean that this can or should be held as a continuous fortified line but that the enemy is NOT to be allowed to establish himself east of it. The two divisions from Gazala position will be available to help in this. Although I do NOT intend that Eighth Army should be besieged in Tobruk I have no intention whatever of giving up Tobruk. My orders to General Ritchie are:

- (a) To deny general line Acroma-El Adem-El Gubi to the enemy.
- (b) NOT to allow his forces to be invested in Tobruk.
- (c) To attack and harass the enemy whenever occasion offers.

Meanwhile I propose to build up strong as possible reserve in Sollum-Maddalena area with object of launching counter-offensive soon as possible.

N.Z. Division already moving should be fully concentrated in about ten or twelve days but leading elements will naturally be available earlier if required.

Trust information you are getting in my signals to C.I.G.S. is adequate.

Churchill wrote eight years later: 'We were not satisfied with these orders to General Ritchie, which did not positively require him to defend Tobruk.'<sup>1</sup> A further telegram was therefore despatched.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

15 June 1942

We are glad to have your assurance that you have no intention of giving up Tobruk. War Cabinet interpret your telegram to mean that, if the need arises, General Ritchie would leave as many troops in Tobruk as are necessary to hold the place for certain.

This was not received in Cairo until 03.50 hours on June 16; there was no time of origin given on the typed copy.

Auchinleck was now enmeshed in a mine-field of cross-purposes. In London the Prime Minister concentrated his strong and stubborn emotions and his imperfect strategic sense on the holding of Tobruk, and the C.I.G.S. wearily and gloomily assented. In Cairo Auchinleck had worked out his own feasible operational plan and had issued the most explicit instructions for its fulfilment. His C.G.S. was at that moment at Eighth Army Headquarters, giving Ritchie his orders. But Ritchie, on Gott's advice, had already taken a series of steps which made it impossible for him to comply with those orders.

Corbett came back to Cairo on the evening of the 15th deeply depressed. Ritchie had declined to reinforce the area between Tobruk and El Gubi with static infantry in position, or to guarantee that he could prevent Rommel from moving farther east. He said that he had already garrisoned Tobruk for isolated defence, and expected that it was bound to be in this condition temporarily at least. He flatly refused to carry out his instructions, saying that they were no longer possible.

Corbett said: 'It was most unpleasant. We thumped the desk and shouted at each other.'

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 332.

While Corbett was undertaking this disagreeable and fruitless mission, Rommel, standing on the escarpment above the Via Balbia realized that the greater part of the 1st South African Division had escaped destruction at his hands. Panzer Army, the weary tank crews crawling back into their vehicles in the hot sunlight, was bidden to close in as quickly as it could on the outer defences of Tobruk. Rommel appreciated, just as fully as Auchinleck did, that El Adem was the pivot. He saw that he must swing the maximum force possible on El Adem and break it. Once El Adem was gone, Tobruk was his.

It was held by two battalions of the 29th Indian Brigade. A third battalion, the 3/12th Frontier Force Rifles, held a smaller defensive position on the ridge to the south, covering the Axis By-Pass Road. Shortly before midday 90th Light Division attacked El Adem itself, and in the late afternoon Rommel sent the 21st Panzer Division south-east from Acroma to join the assault. *En route* the Frontier Force battalion was overwhelmed, and some seven hundred prisoners were taken. Rommel regarded this as a promising beginning to the battle.

Two thousand miles away in London the D.M.O. had a talk with the C.I.G.S. Kennedy told Brooke the story of Tobruk in April 1941, and made the point that Wavell's decision to hold it then was only justified when the Germans concentrated all their available forces on the Russian Front. The limelight, he said, had been on the place so much that its political and prestige value had now become very great; that was bound to be a real difficulty for the Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup> In fairness to Churchill it should be pointed out that he did not regard it as a difficulty; he himself set the highest political and prestige—as well as military—value on Tobruk; his sentiments were based on a faulty appreciation of the facts, but they were not cynical or opportunist.

The urgency as well as the sincerity of these sentiments sharpened Auchinleck's dilemma. He made a final attempt to resolve it.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie*

16 June 1942. 08.00 hrs.

Although I have made it clear to you that Tobruk must not

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 242. Much earlier in February, Kennedy, commenting on Auchinleck's Operation Instruction 110 and its (now vital) paragraph: It is *not* my intention to try to hold, permanently, Tobruk or any other locality west of the Frontier,' had said, 'Tobruk last year might have proved another Kut. . . . In my opinion, it would be right to avoid such detachments in future.' Were Auchinleck's operation instructions and the D.M.O.'s observations on it ever brought by the C.I.G.S. to the Prime Minister's attention?



be invested, I realize that its garrison may be isolated for short periods until our counter-offensive can be launched. With this possibility in mind you are free to organize the garrison as you think best and to retain whatever administrative services and stocks of all sorts you consider necessary either for the service of the garrison or to assist the counter-offensive.

Churchill in his War Memoirs quoted the first sentence of this telegram and commented: 'Had I seen this order I should not have been content with it.'

Auchinleck, the order despatched, spent most of the morning on June 16 in consultation with the Minister of State and the other two Commanders-in-Chief. At 15.15 hours he sent a reply to the Prime Minister's signal of the previous day.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

16 June 1942

War Cabinet interpretation is correct. General Ritchie is putting into Tobruk what he considers an adequate force to hold it even should it become temporarily isolated by enemy. Basis of garrison is four brigade groups with adequate stocks of ammunition, food, fuel and water. Basis of immediate future action by Eighth Army is to hold El Adem fortified area as pivot of manoeuvre and to use all available mobile forces to prevent enemy establishing himself east of El Adem or Tobruk. Very definite orders to this effect have been issued to General Ritchie and I trust he will be able to give effect to them. Position is quite different from last year as *we* and *not* enemy now hold fortified positions on Frontier and can operate fighter aircraft over Tobruk even if use Gambut landing grounds should be temporarily denied to us. It seems to me that to invest Tobruk *and* to mask our forces in the frontier positions, the enemy would need more troops than our information shows him to have. This being so we should be able to prevent the area between the Frontier and Tobruk passing under enemy control. I have discussed matter with Minister of State and other Commanders-in-Chief who agree with the policy proposed.

Kennedy's jottings in his diary on the same day made a significant commentary. Kennedy was the only one in the inner circles of the higher command in the United Kingdom who fully understood Auchinleck's viewpoint and was aware of his dilemma; but he was not influential enough to make his opinions felt.

The Mediterranean situation [he wrote] is in rather a mess. . . . It is such a pity that Winston's fine courage and drive cannot be harnessed to the war effort in a more rational way. . . . A more dangerous matter at the moment is his pressure on Auchinleck to hold Tobruk.

But he also remarked (whether at the time or later is not clear) that Auchinleck's telegram 'had not summed up the pros and cons at all adequately'. It is not on this foundation that criticism of Auchinleck at this moment must rest. He was in an unbearable situation, and he bore it with fortitude. But the two principal causes of that situation were the Prime Minister's pressure, to which he submitted, and Ritchie's disobedience, which he condoned. On the first, he had his own and Wavell's experience to guide him, and Dill's wisdom to strengthen him. On the second, it is not enough to claim that his ration of sackings had expired. Ritchie had to go. He went in the end. He should have gone much earlier. The tragedy of Tobruk—its strategic value or lack of it apart, it was a tragedy—was the first instalment of the price which was paid for the Prime Minister's obstinacy, for Ritchie's ineptitude and indiscipline, and for Auchinleck's capitulation to these sombrely concentric influences.

His latest telegram cheered Churchill on the eve of his departure for Washington.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

16 June 1942

1. I am thankful you have succeeded in regrouping the Eighth Army on the new front in close contact with your reinforcements, and the Cabinet was very glad to know that you intended to hold Tobruk at all costs. Let us know whether much stores fell into enemy's hands.

2. We cannot, of course, judge at the present time battle tactics from here. Certainly it would seem, however, that advantage would be gained if the whole of our forces were engaged together at one time, and if the initiative could be recovered. It may be the new situation will give you this opportunity, especially if the enemy, who is evidently himself hard-pressed, is given no breathing space. Armoured warfare seems to favour the offensive because it allows a design to be unfolded step by step, whereas the defensive, which was so powerful in the last war, has to yield itself continually to the plans of the attacker.

All good wishes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An incomplete version of this telegram containing several textual variations is to be found in Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, pp. 332-3.

Another signal, however, sent by Mr. Casey on the same day, was more coldly received. It concerned an aspect of the Middle East battle from which eyes in London were customarily averted—starvation in the matter of modern long-range bombing aircraft. On May 30 a thousand bombers had been sent to attack Cologne, some six hundred acres of which were laid in ruins. Now, eighteen days later, the representative of the War Cabinet in the Middle East drew pointed attention to the modest but important needs of the theatre of war in which only a small proportion of this huge force could have been of real use.

*Minister of State to Prime Minister*

16 June 1942

I hope you will not think me ungrateful for the assistance we have already received from you in the matter of the loan of the Liberator aircraft now operating here, but I feel I must put to you again the case for a force of modern high-speed heavy bombers in this theatre. Events of the last few days have brought home to me very clearly the value which such a force would be to us in the present situation.

As I see it our problem, and the enemy's, is primarily one of supply. We must get supplies to Malta. He must get supplies to North Africa. Whoever controls the sea holds the whiphand.

At present we have not got the ships to control the sea which is in the enemy's hands. Not only can he prevent our ships getting to Malta, but he can pass his supplies across the Mediterranean with comparative immunity.

With a reasonable force of heavy bombers however, we should be able to scour the Mediterranean, search out his ships and once again menace his lines of supply. Such ships as might reach his ports would again be subjected to ruthless attack.

At the same time we should be able to attack his heavy ships in harbour and again if they put to sea, thus giving our ships a fair chance of reaching Malta. Yesterday, as I have already told you, the few Liberators that we have successfully attacked the Italian fleet. But the force was too small. If we had a big enough force the results might have been decisive and 'Vigorous'<sup>1</sup> might have been approaching Malta.

Looking around to see what can be done to help Auchinleck in his hard fight in the Desert and to help Tedder and Harwood<sup>2</sup> in their struggle to save Malta, it seems to me that the only way

<sup>1</sup> The code-name of the current Malta convoy.

<sup>2</sup> Adm. Sir H. Harwood. He had succeeded Adm. Cunningham as naval C.-in-C. at the end of May.

in which we can strengthen our position here in the immediate future is by giving them a substantial force of these aircraft. May I ask you once more to give this your sympathetic and urgent consideration ?

The help for which Cascy pleaded so eloquently was not forthcoming. There is no indication that his telegram was even accorded the courtesy of a formal acknowledgment. The Prime Minister was, of course, very busy.

\* \* \*

Ritchie, meanwhile, had been considering the Commander-in-Chief's directive sent to him that morning. His reaction to it must be seen in the light of his changed relationship with Auchinleck.

Churchill said that the arrangement which Auchinleck made for this summer campaign was a 'compromise'.

He left the fighting of the decisive battle to General Ritchie, who had so recently ceased to be his Deputy Chief of Staff. At the same time he kept this officer under strict supervision, sending him continuous instructions.<sup>1</sup>

To this Churchill ascribed Auchinleck's personal failure, while admitting that some of the blame lay with himself and his colleagues for 'the unduly wide responsibilities assigned a year before to the Middle East Command'. Giving no hint that he was aware of any inconsistency, Churchill added: 'Still, we had done our best to free him from these undue burdens by precise, up-to-date and superseding advice, which he had not accepted.'

Sir Francis de Guinand said that General Auchinleck at this time was disturbed by the possible effects of what some people called his 'undue interference' with the command of Eighth Army, and explained that he (Auchinleck) 'was very worried that by his control he was making Ritchie's task more difficult'.

Auchinleck himself has said: 'Perhaps I did hold Ritchie's hand too much at times.'

These criticisms have validity in so far as they concern Ritchie's earlier period of command. Auchinleck's advice was good advice—on military grounds a good deal better than that which, precise, up-to-date and superseding as it was, Churchill gave to Auchinleck—and when Ritchie took it he was a successful general. When he

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, p. 329.

rejected it, when he fell under other influences, he failed. Men who were subordinate to him, but were sure of themselves and had a greater faith in their own judgment than he had in his, could sway his opinion. From May 26 onwards the strongest influence exerted on Ritchie's mind was that of Gott. The South African official historians stated no more than the plain truth when they said that, faced with a divergence between the expressed wishes of the Commander-in-Chief and the advice of Gott, Ritchie preferred the latter.

This, however, was a habit which had grown upon Ritchie in recent months. Gott's merits as a man were many—his courage, his charm, his serenity and his unfailing good humour—and they made a legend of him in his lifetime and long after his death. The South African official historians enumerated the qualities which gave rise to this legend, and one at least had a curious ring to it: 'his readiness always to propose a solution when others could not decide what to do'.<sup>1</sup> It was to Gott that Ritchie turned now as often before. This might have been pardonable had Gott's advice been proved by results to be good. But Gott's previous career offered no evidence that he possessed a tenth of Auchinleck's military judgment or perception; and the consequences of listening to him, rather than to Auchinleck, since the beginning of the Gazala battles, had been uniformly unfortunate. But these consequences—just as much as the fact that they flowed from taking Gott's advice—had been concealed from Auchinleck for far too long. The pattern of false optimism, faulty decisions, resultant reverses, and the minimization or disregard of those reverses and the lessons they should have taught, had been established. It was to bring Eighth Army to defeat, and the whole of Britain's war effort in the Middle East to the edge of destruction.

On June 16 Ritchie went to 13th Corps H.Q. to talk to Gott, who still maintained—as he had maintained, without modification, for the past forty-eight hours—that the right policy was to take the main body of Eighth Army back to the Frontier as quickly as possible and leave Tobruk to stand a two months' siege.

This conference was held in Tobruk itself—Ritchie flew in to it in a captured Storch—and General Kloppe, the commander of 2nd South African Division, whose duty it would be to take over all the forces in Tobruk, was present for part of the time. The atmosphere was breezily optimistic. Gott thought that the defence preparations made a 'nice, tidy show', far better than the state of

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 107.

affairs when the Australian, Morshead, had taken over a year before. Kloppe was assured that El Adem and Belhamed would be firmly held. He agreed that he could hold Tobruk itself for ninety days. The harmonious mood of the discussion was neatly summed up by Gott's G.S.O.1, who said to Kloppe: 'Thank God we have one commander who knows how to obey an order.'

Thus cheered, Ritchie hurried back to his own headquarters.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck* 16 June 1942. 16.30 hrs.

Many thanks for your signal which greatly eases my mind. Have discussed at length with Gott today and feel convinced we can always accept investment for short periods with every prospect of success if we go all out to build up strength on south. Belhamed is the most vital place of all in ensuring keeping door open. So we must aim at holding El Adem to cover that place. Reports to the present indicate that about seventy per cent 50th Division are back, but I believe later report will prove better.

Am trying in accordance with your wish to reinforce El Adem 'box' with additional artillery, but this has not yet been possible due to tactical situation here. I hope 9th Lancers with twenty more [guns ?] have also been moved in from south. Guns of two of our columns will be able to bear as I hope Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed can too.

What was the difference between 'investment' and 'isolation'? And what was meant by 'short periods'—two months?

On June 17 Auchinleck wrote the last in that series of friendly, informative letters—'My dear Neil', 'My dear Chief'—which he and Ritchie had exchanged over the past six months.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie* 17 June 1942

I enclose an extract from a telegram I have just had from the Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup> As it seems so exactly to coincide with your views and mine on the subject, I want to be able to tell him that we are acting on it at once. Hence my insistence, which I hope you will forgive, on the prime need for not waiting to reorganize 1st S.A. Div. and 50th Div., which presumably came out as formed units, and for getting their artillery and mobile infantry into action again at once under Gott, who is now, I understand, in command of all the forward area.

The enemy *must* be kept under the heaviest pressure. . . . I want

<sup>1</sup> The extract was para. 2 of the Prime Minister's message of 16 June 1942 quoted above, p. 579.

to see your troops working wide to the west, well beyond El Adem, and biting at the enemy wherever met, especially the Italians who are now having to come into the open.

You must not tolerate Trieste messing round Gott's southern flank.

I think 'Mary' Coningham's effort is perfectly magnificent, and an inspiration to all of us, including myself.

The return I have of food, water, ammunition and fuel in Tobruk seems satisfactory, and I am assuming that you are taking the most urgent action to make up deficiencies such as twenty-five-pounder and S.A. ammunition by road convoy.

Are you happy about the water situation? All available storage should be filled to capacity if this has not already been done.

I presume the troops in the Sollum-Hamra defences are pressing on with their completion and finishing up mine-fields and wire, etc. It is as well to have this base as secure as possible before we go forward in force again.

If you are going to keep the 201st Motor Bde in the Tobruk sector, I trust they will be used to the full in their mobile capacity to attack the enemy. I am sure this is your intention. . . .

I have said it so often before that I am afraid you must be sick of it, but I say it again! The task of the Eighth Army *now* is not to receive blows but to give them, and to give them on an ever-increasing scale until we can go forward again in a *general* offensive.

I am sure the enemy is exhausted and weakened, and would give anything for a period of rest and reorganization now. Also he has great anxiety over his fuel situation.

We *must* keep him under pressure, and this calls for the greatest personal energy on the part of *all* concerned, commanders and staff officers alike, from the highest to the lowest.

I rely on you personally to see that the necessary drive and *ruthlessness* is forthcoming.

If any of your commanders is tired, send him back to rest. You have a surplus at the moment I think.

Good luck and go to it.

But between Ritchie's telegram of the afternoon of June 16 and Auchinleck's letter of the 17th much had happened. An hour after he had sent his signal to the Commander-in-Chief, Ritchie telephoned Norrie, commanding 30th Corps, and said that he was most anxious that El Adem should continue to be held, that he himself, however, had no knowledge of the local situation, and that

he would, therefore, leave the responsibility to Norrie 'as the local situation must decide'.

The local situation was, to put it in the gentle jargon of the time, extremely fluid. Ritchie's only battleworthy formation left was 4th Armoured Brigade; by strenuous efforts in the workshops their strength had been brought up to some one hundred tanks. After a final refit at Gambut the brigade moved up towards Sidi Rezegh on the afternoon of June 16. The 'box' at Sidi Rezegh was held by a battalion—the 1/6 Rajputana Rifles—of 20th Indian Brigade; and it was being attacked by 21st Panzer Division, which threw out a screen of tanks and anti-tank guns strong enough to hold off 4th Armoured Brigade. The resistance of the 'box' was vigorous and gave the attackers a good deal of trouble; but by nightfall this battle was over, and the remnants of the defenders pulled out in the darkness towards Belhamed.

Meanwhile Brigadier Reid, whose 29th Indian Brigade had held El Adem with valour and efficiency, had been throughout the day assailed not only by the enemy but by a series of remarkably contradictory orders. Messervy wanted him to evacuate the position, Norrie wanted him to hold it; Ritchie said at 14.25 hours that it must be held at all costs; at 19.00 hours Norrie gave Messervy (who had assembled a column of lorries to assist in the evacuation) discretion to withdraw the garrison if he thought fit. When Messervy communicated this decision, if it can be so described, to Reid by radio telephone, Reid replied that his men were keyed up to resistance to the end; any changes would lower their morale and probably cause a confused and unsatisfactory break-out; he thought it would be better to wait till the next night. Messervy said: 'I understand your point of view, and I agree with you. But you won't get any relief from us. Any chance of our advancing is out. If your patrols show you there's any chance of your getting out, and you want to take it, do so at your own discretion.'

Reid did decide to break out that night. However—and who in the turmoil through which this courageous and imperturbable officer had lived in the past few days could blame him?—he forgot the code-word. He sent a signal in a cipher which was not held by the H.Q. of 7th Armoured Division; it had, therefore, to be sent to 30th Corps H.Q. and returned in a different cipher. Only when this elaborate but essential ritual had been performed did Messervy know; he immediately sent transport, and throughout June 17 the major part of the brigade was taken out of the battle area to reform and rejoin its own division.

Messervy remarked: 'I am thankful that the operation took place



that night; any further delay and another good brigade would have gone.' Von Mellenthin had a different point of view: 'From that moment the defence of Tobruk ceased to be a serious operation of war.'

The noose was tightening. Rommel had two objectives in view. He was as stubborn in his way about Tobruk as Churchill was; he wanted to capture it as much as Churchill wanted to hold it. His second objective, when the first had been fulfilled, was the final destruction of Eighth Army; and on military grounds he was convinced that the capture of Tobruk would contribute greatly to the fulfilment of this second intention.

On the morning of June 17, however, there was still a chance that the British might frustrate Rommel's hopes. Tobruk was not yet completely surrounded. The remainder of 20th Indian Infantry Brigade held still at Belhamed; the 2nd Free French and 21st Indian Infantry Brigades were on the high ground overlooking Gambut; and the road eastwards to Bardia was thus still open. There was also 4th Armoured Brigade.

This formation had leaguered on the previous night in the Desert about ten miles south-east of Sidi Rezegh. In spite of a provident, if belated, signal sent out by Eighth Army early in the morning, saying that enemy tanks were to be engaged by artillery, and that British tanks were to be reserved for operations 'under favourable conditions' (whatever those might be), Messervy, who had been bidden to dominate Sidi Rezegh, ordered 4th Armoured Brigade to advance to a position between Sidi Rezegh and El Adem.<sup>1</sup>

With dismal frequency the British commanders were obliging Rommel by doing what he expected and wanted. By 11.15 hours 21st Panzer had been able to report that a British attack was imminent. Rommel concentrated the Afrika Korps and Ariete Division, and at 15.50 hours, when 4th Armoured Brigade were cautiously feeling their way westwards, the Axis forces attacked at great speed from the south-west and west. Von Mellenthin paid a tribute to the great gallantry of one unit, the 9th Lancers; but in order to avoid being overwhelmed and cut off, Richards ordered the regiments to break off the fight and withdraw to a position near the Trigh el Abd, twenty miles to the south-east. Von Mellenthin said that the brigade

<sup>1</sup> 'The brigade commander [Brig. G. W. Richards] protested against the unsuitability of this position, but issued the necessary orders, and then left to interview the corps commander.' This laconic statement in *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 123, throws into harsh relief the strange and sad mood into which Eighth Army, as a whole, had fallen.

lost half their strength and were pursued far to the south. Auchinleck in his despatch said that they had lost all but twenty of their tanks. Liddell Hart, in the official history of the Royal Tank Regiment, contested this, and gave a total loss of nine. He added: 'Although a considerable number had to be sent to the workshops, fifty-eight remained fit for action next day.'<sup>1</sup>

There was, however, no action. With the exception of forty-eight heavy tanks in Tobruk and twenty-three more on or near the Frontier, the whole tank force of Eighth Army now retired eastwards into Egypt. There thus ended what a British brigadier described as 'a week of progressive disintegration'.

As darkness fell Rommel put himself at the head of the Afrika Korps, and shortly after midnight on June 17-18 21st Panzer Division cut the Via Balbia near Gambut. Von Mellenthin recorded: 'All British troops in the area were in full flight to the east; some efforts had been made to demolish the supply dumps but we captured enormous quantities of petrol and rations, and a good deal of transport.'

It was as nothing to the booty which was to come.

The blows continued to rain in. Eighth Army ordered 20th Indian Brigade to evacuate Belhamed<sup>2</sup> and break through eastwards to the Frontier. This was one more extraordinarily misguided decision. For, as the South African official historians pointed out, the road to Tobruk was still clear, and the brigade could have provided a much-needed reinforcement to the Indians holding the south-east face of the fortress. Some time on the morning of June 18 this unfortunate formation encountered the full weight of the Afrika Korps moving westwards from Gambut, and suffered such heavy casualties that its name disappeared from Eighth Army's Order of Battle.

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On June 18 Auchinleck, accompanied by Eric Dorman-Smith, flew up to Ritchie's Headquarters, which were now established at Sollum. Dorman-Smith wrote: 'I was struck by the general failure to assess the real seriousness of the situation, and the apparent belief that Rommel, having achieved so much, would now take his time over Tobruk. It seemed to me that the Command of Eighth Army

<sup>1</sup> *The Tanks*, Vol. II, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> Belhamed had seemed to Ritchie at 16.30 hours on June 16 'the most vital place of all'.

all too readily accepted the coming isolation of Tobruk—the very thing they had been told to prevent.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck was disturbed by the atmosphere. Ritchie assured him that Tobruk would not be permitted to be invested. But by that evening Tobruk was completely invested.

It is, however, arguable that, on this, the eve of his apparently greatest triumph, Rommel made one of his greatest mistakes. Had he swung the whole of Panzer Army east and south on the night of June 18–19, he would have caught Eighth Army—defeated, confused, and still obstinately complacent—off their balance, and could have hurled them back in rout deep into Egypt. He would, it is true, have left in his rear the considerable forces now gathered in Tobruk; but by this time a completely passive role had been imposed on them, and they could have been dealt with later, or hammered into submission by Kesselring's Stukas.

Rommel, however, held to his order of priorities: Tobruk, in its isolation, first; and thereafter, as he believed, an even more glittering prize. Around Tobruk the Axis forces gathered: the Italian XXIst Corps to the west, the Italian Xth Corps to the south, the Trieste Division and German reconnaissance units to the south-east and east. The Afrika Korps and Ariete, gorged as crocodiles with victory, leaguered near Gambut. Only just before the initial onslaught were they to be brought up to the battle area.

The defenders, under the command of the G.O.C. 2nd South African Division, Major-General H. B. Klopper,<sup>1</sup> were: 4th and 6th South African Infantry Brigades, 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, 201st Guards Brigade and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade, which mustered, by the time the attack began, fifty-four Matildas and Valentines armed with their two-pounder guns (the increase on the figures of two days earlier was the result of feverish activity in the workshops); there were two regiments of field and two of medium artillery, and about seventy anti-tank guns distributed among various units.<sup>2</sup> This rather miscellaneous force numbered between 33,000 and 35,000 men.

Since so large a proportion of the force was South African, and the commander was a young South African general, it was inevitable that interest in the fate of Tobruk was keenly aroused in the Union, from the Prime Minister downwards. Smuts signalled to Auchinleck asking his intentions.

<sup>1</sup> He had held this rank for one month.

<sup>2</sup> 13th Corps H.Q., before they departed on the evening of June 16, sent out eighteen 3.7 A.A. guns—a step of doubtful wisdom in view of what happened four days later.

## ROMMEL TAKES TOBRUK

*General Auchinleck to Field-Marshal Smuts* 19 June 1942. 14.30 hrs.

Have no intention of giving up Tobruk, which I hope is only temporarily isolated. Ritchie will defend Tobruk and the strong Sollum-Hamra-Maddalena position prepared long ago against such a contingency as has now arisen, and will do all he can to keep situation fluid in the space between Sollum and Tobruk by using maximum number mobile troops available. These will also, I hope, harry enemy communications. Meanwhile I am planning as always to destroy enemy. Klopfer commands in Tobruk and he has full confidence Ritchie and myself. He will make himself as offensive as possible and has I think an adequate force under him which is well supplied with necessities.

June 19 was for Rommel a day of careful preparations, which he hoped, and all subsequent German writers on this theme asserted, to be utterly unknown to the British.

*General Ritchie to General Auchinleck* 20 June 1942. 01.00 hrs.

There have been no signs today of enemy making any effort except with small reconnaissance detachments to press eastwards towards Frontier. Personally I feel that having removed our air threat from Gambut group of aerodromes he is likely now to turn his main attention to Tobruk though a diversionary effort possibly in strength may still be staged against Frontier to deceive us if he can. This would, however, delay his operation against Tobruk. I consider we must be prepared for enemy undertaking main effort in either direction, and the best counter is to build up as strong a force as possible in the Desert to threaten his southern flank while planning specific operations to be carried out by Tobruk garrison and 13th Corps to meet either eventuality. Am discussing these with Gott tomorrow morning, and sending in a staff officer to Tobruk tomorrow night to arrange co-ordination with Klopfer. I will send you details later. The building-up of an adequate southern force is going to be a slow process. . . .

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie* 20 June 1942. 16.30 hrs.

Enemy movement yesterday showed intention launch early attack Tobruk from east. Know you realize extreme urgency interfering with this every means in your power and that you will act accordingly.

*General Auchinleck to General Ritchie* 20 June 1942

Am perturbed by apparently deliberate nature of your preparations though I realize difficulties. Crisis may arise in matter of

hours, not days, and you must, therefore, put in everything you can raise. Am seriously alarmed, too, by inability of air to support Tobruk from present positions. You must do all you can to protect forward landing grounds from which they can at any rate give some help to Tobruk.

Both these signals—the time of origin of the second was not given—were too late to be of more than historical interest. Auchinleck had done everything he could to prevent Tobruk being besieged. The Prime Minister's insistence and Ritchie's reliance on Gott's advice instead of acceptance of Auchinleck's orders had frustrated this intention. Ought Auchinleck to have disobeyed the Prime Minister and dismissed Ritchie because Ritchie had disobeyed him? There may have been other commanders who could have performed this moral somersault. He, however, was not of that tribe. A code of conduct, inherited from his forebears and instilled into him, by example as much as by precept, at school and in his own career as a soldier, governed his thought and actions.

The debacle in Tobruk was swift and terrible. Auchinleck, who had done his best to avert it, gave his own account of it in his despatch. It contained no word of exculpation of himself or of blame for others. It was sheerly factual, and in all essentials accurate.

The attack opened at about six-thirty in the morning of June 20 with a heavy artillery bombardment and dive-bombing attacks on the centre of the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade. Within an hour the posts on the perimeter in that sector had been overrun. An immediate counter-attack was made by carriers of the Mahratta Light Infantry, but was brought to a standstill by anti-tank gunfire. Then the enemy, covered by smoke screens, began to penetrate gaps in the mine-fields on the right of the brigade sector, and to advance deliberately on a narrow front towards King's Cross.<sup>1</sup>

At about eight-thirty the Coldstream Guards were warned to move to the west of King's Cross to attack in conjunction with the 4th Royal Tank Regiment. But, when they arrived, it was discovered that both squadrons of that regiment had already been committed to a counter-attack. Meanwhile the 7th Royal Tank Regiment had also been ordered to move to the threatened area.

<sup>1</sup> King's Cross was a defended locality, some nine miles south of Tobruk itself, at the junction of the Via Balbia and the road from El Adem.

But it seems that they, too, had gone into action along the road towards El Adem. By one o'clock, apparently all our tanks were out of action.

The enemy tanks continued to advance, destroying our field artillery in their defensive positions gun by gun. At about two o'clock King's Cross was taken, and the enemy overran the rear-most artillery position in the eastern sector. At the same time the Headquarters of the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade ceased to function. The German thrust then divided. One portion continued along the top of the escarpment, causing the Coldstream Guards a number of casualties, and overrunning the Sherwood Foresters and, with them, the Headquarters of the 201st Guards Brigade. The other column of German tanks proceeded down the road to the town. The harbour came under fire at five o'clock in the afternoon, and by six o'clock was cut off from the rest of the fortress.

About noon this day General Ritchie ordered the 30th Corps to use the 7th Armoured Division to advance on Tobruk. The division reached an area some twenty miles south of the perimeter just before dark. About an hour later General Klopper reported by wireless to General Ritchie's B.G.S. telling him what had befallen and asking to be allowed to fight his way out. He was authorized to do so and was told that an endeavour would be made to hold open a gap between El Adem and Knightsbridge. About an hour later General Klopper again communicated with the Eighth Army to say that, as the greater part of his transport had been cut off in the harbour area, it was impossible to get it to the troops on the perimeter, who had practically no vehicles.

During the night, the Headquarters of the Army were intermittently in touch with General Klopper, and early on June 21 learned from him that all water and petrol had been destroyed. He also informed the Eighth Army that the whole of his transport had been captured and on that account he had been unable to break out. An order was circulated to all units in the garrison that a capitulation had taken place and that all vehicles, equipment and arms were to be destroyed.

Certain detachments, which were in possession of transport, then elected to break out, and some succeeded in rejoining the Eighth Army. Other British, Indian, and South African units continued to fight on throughout the 21st and there is evidence that more than one unit was still fighting on June 22.

Nearly 35,000 British, Indian and South African soldiers were taken prisoner. Large quantities of supplies, ammunition, vehicles, petrol and guns fell into Axis hands—though not nearly as large as Rommel had confidently anticipated. This made him very angry. When he met General Klopper and senior British and South African officers some six kilometres outside the town at 09.40 hours on the morning of June 21, he shouted and blustered at them like a sergeant-major in a temper. This, they thought, detracted from his dignity in his hour of triumph. Next day he heard by wireless from Hitler's Headquarters that, at forty-nine years of age, he had been made a Field-Marshal.

21 June 1942, was Claude Auchinleck's fifty-eighth birthday.

## Intermission with Politicians—II

AN important aspect of the tragedy of Tobruk was that Churchill, both at the time and later, was incapable of recognizing that he himself was one of its principal instigators, at the level of the supreme direction of policy. At this level he attributed all the blame to Auchinleck, all of whose efforts had been directed towards preventing the catastrophe which the Prime Minister's wilful and sentimental interference did much to precipitate. At the operational level, where the blame lay between Ritchie and Gott, Churchill's judgment was hardly less faulty. He misunderstood the situation at the time, and perpetuated that misunderstanding as his version of history.

This version must be corrected, particularly since Churchill chose to say in 1950, 'Now that the salient facts are known the truth should not be obscured.' His indictment of Auchinleck is contained in two sentences:

The personal association of Auchinleck and Ritchie did not give Ritchie a chance of those independent conceptions on which the command of violent events depends. The lack of clear thought and the ill-defined responsibility between General Auchinleck and his recent staff officer, General Ritchie, had led to a mishandling of the forces which in its character and consequences constitutes an unfortunate page in British military history.<sup>1</sup>

First—and this is fundamental to any understanding of the whole conduct of the war at the highest level—the Prime Minister's constant supervision in itself gave the Commander-in-Chief no 'chance of those independent conceptions on which the command of violent events depends'. It would be irrelevant quibbling to emphasize this inconsistency were it not that, in the first place, Churchill's military judgment was frequently and massively at fault, and, in

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, p. 378.



the second place, he strove afterwards to demonstrate that he had been right, and that the blame for failure in those whom he had compelled to obey his orders lay at their door and not at his.

Secondly, there was no lack of clear thought and no ill-defined responsibility as between Auchinleck and Ritchie. The confusion and the lack of definition were largely in Churchill himself, who refused to understand any difference in responsibility between the Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Forces and the Commander of Eighth Army, as his many admonitions to Auchinleck demonstrated.

In political matters Churchill could be magnanimous. On military matters, about which others had deeper knowledge, more recent experience and training, a higher standard of self-discipline and a more penetrating intuition, he showed himself to be arrogant, obstinate and unforgiving.

Censures such as these must be justified by evidence. Much, though not all, of that evidence has been supplied by Churchill himself. The gaps are not insignificant. The direct lie bludgeons truth. Omission puts her apparently to sleep. Awakened, she can prove extremely formidable.

\* \* \*

The news that the blow which he had done so much to make inevitable had fallen, and that Rommel had captured Tobruk, was delivered to Churchill in the White House in Washington on Sunday, June 21.<sup>1</sup>

During that Sunday the Middle East Defence Committee—Casey, Harwood, Auchinleck and Tedder—approved and transmitted to London and to Washington a long appreciation and account of action taken consequent upon 'the impending fall of Tobruk'. It went out at 15.45 hours G.M.T.:

... Enemy is likely to follow up his success rapidly encouraged by speedy capture of Tobruk. We believe he thinks us weak which will further encourage him. He is, therefore, likely to attack Sollum defences, at the same time pushing his armour and artillery round to secure the escarpment in the gap between Hamra and Sollum. This would have the effect of isolating Sollum.

Courses open to us. First, to fight the enemy on the frontier defences. Without adequate armoured forces this entails risking

<sup>1</sup> There are discrepancies between Churchill's account and Brooke's account of this event; they are of psychological rather than historical interest.

the loss of all our infantry holding the frontier position. Second course: to delay the enemy on the Frontier with forces which are kept fully mobile, while withdrawing main body of Eighth Army to the Matruh defences. This coupled with delaying action by our air forces gives us best chance of gaining time in which to re-organize and build up a striking force with which to resume the offensive.

After a most thorough appreciation by the Combined Staffs and the most careful consideration by the Defence Committee we have decided on the second course and orders as follows have already been issued:

(a) Rapid development of the Matruh position including the southern portion of it with all available means.

(b) Move of all installations and stores to the east of Matruh.

(c) Preparation of demolitions in the frontier area.

(d) Holding of the frontier position as long as possible by fully mobile forces strong in artillery. Orders to these forces will be to impose maximum delay on the enemy should he try to advance eastwards, and to secure all forward landing grounds and aerodromes west of Matruh for as long as possible.

(e) Maximum delaying action by our air forces.

(f) Occupation of Matruh defences by N.Z. Div. and 10th Armd Div. as rallying point for Eighth Army falling back.

(g) Rapid organization of strongest possible striking force with a view to destroying the enemy when he is fully extended and as soon as possible. . . .<sup>1</sup>

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

22 June 1942. Washington 06.31 hrs.

C.I.G.S., Dill and I earnestly hope stern resistance will be made on the Sollum frontier line. Special Intelligence has shown stresses which enemy has undergone. Very important reinforcements are on their way. A week gained may be decisive. We do not know exact dates of deployment New Zealand Division but had expected it would be by the end of the month. 8th Armoured and 44th are approaching and near. We agree with General Smuts that you may draw freely upon Ninth and Tenth Armies as the danger from north is more remote. Thus you can effect drastic roulement with the three divisions now east of the Canal.

*Two:* I was naturally disconcerted by your news which may

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill (op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 379) gave a truncated version of this essential signal and commented, 'I did not welcome this decision.'

well put us back to where we were eighteen months ago and leave all the work of that period to be done over again. However I do not feel that the defence of the Delta can not be effectively maintained and I hope no one will be unduly impressed by the spectacular blows which the enemy has struck at us.

I am sure that with your perseverance and resolution and continued readiness to run risks, the situation can be restored, especially in view of the large reinforcements approaching.

*Three:* Here in Washington the President is deeply moved by what has occurred, and he and other high United States authorities show themselves disposed to lend the utmost help. They authorize me to inform you that the 2nd United States Armoured Division, specially trained in desert warfare in California, will leave for Suez about July 5 and should be with you in August. You need not send the Indian division and Indian armoured brigade back to India as proposed. Measures are also being taken . . . to divert India-bound aircraft to the Libyan theatre. . . . I have told C.A.S. to give you his schedules of deliveries including the four Halifax squadrons, unless he has already done so.

*Four:* The main thing now is for you to inspire all your forces with an intense will to resist and strive and not to accept the freak decisions produced by Rommel's handful of heavy armour. Make sure that all your manpower plays a full part in these critical days. His Majesty's Government is quite ready to share your responsibilities in making the most active and daring defence.

In London, the War Cabinet (presided over by the Deputy Prime Minister, Attlee) and the Chiefs of Staff also considered Cairo's appreciation.

Auchinleck's friend, Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for India, noted in his diary that day:

Cabinet, at which we discussed Tobruk without much light on what really happened. Auchinleck's telegram sent just before it fell was not illuminating, but it looks as if the decision to hold it had been taken in a hurry.

*Deputy Prime Minister to Minister of State and Commanders-in-Chief Middle East*

22 June 1942. 00.18 hrs.

The War Cabinet have carefully considered your telegram of June 21 and approve the general policy outlined [therein]. They feel, however, that sufficient emphasis has not been placed on the difficulties which confront the enemy in staging a successful attack

on the Frontier defences. If the fighting on the Frontier is to be merely a rearguard action, we feel that Matruh position may be quickly overrun, but if a resolute and determined defence is offered by the troops detailed for frontier defence, you may arrest his advance altogether, or at the worst gain time to build up an armoured striking force to operate offensively from Matruh.

You may rest assured that we will make every effort to divert all possible material now on the high seas to your theatre of war.

Details will be sent by Chiefs of Staff.

*Middle East Defence Committee to Deputy Prime Minister (Repeated to Prime Minister in Washington)* 23 June 1942. 16.30 hrs.

We realize only too well the desirability of holding the enemy on the frontier position and it will not be given up lightly.

It is necessary, however, to realize the true value of these defences in present circumstances. They consist of two main defended areas designed to be held by infantry and artillery, assisted by a mobile reserve of armoured troops of sufficient strength to deal with an attack by enemy tanks either round the southern flank or through the gap between the two main defended localities, which are thirty miles apart. We have not now got the minimum armoured troops essential for this purpose. In their absence there is nothing to prevent the enemy isolating the troops in these defences and destroying them piecemeal. The result would be that there would be insufficient troops for the Matruh position, and these would consequently be speedily overrun. The Matruh position requires an armoured mobile reserve equally with the frontier position.

We need time to reorganize an armoured striking force and meanwhile to conserve our strength and ensure the safety of Egypt. This time we can get only by increasing the distance the enemy has to cover before he comes to grips with our main forces.

Our action, therefore, will be (a) to make full use of the frontier defences and mine-fields by means of mobile covering troops strong in artillery and fully supported by the air. These can delay and inflict loss on the enemy without themselves being encircled and destroyed; (b) to build up an armoured reserve and prepare for an offensive defensive battle in the Matruh area with object of keeping enemy westward of Matruh, should he advance in force. This procedure denies the enemy the advantage of his present armoured momentum for the decisive action he hopes to develop on the Frontier, and forces him to face the formidable problem of invading Egypt in strength across the 120

miles of waterless country between the Frontier and Matruh. A decisive battle in the Matruh area can therefore be fought under many advantages for us. But as soon as we are fit for mobile offensive operations, the main body Eighth Army will close up again on the Frontier.

We suggest that you invite Major-General Galloway, General Staff War Office<sup>1</sup> to explain to you the effect on strategy and tactics of the almost complete lack in the Western Desert of obstacles to mechanized movement, and the resulting freedom of action conferred on the side which has the superiority in armour, no matter how strong in infantry or however well entrenched the other side may be.

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister* 24 June 1942. 14.15 hrs.

Thank you for your telegram of June 22.

I deeply regret that you should have received this severe blow at so critical a time as a result of the heavy defeat suffered by the forces under my command. I fear that the position is now much what it was a year ago when I took over command, except that the enemy now has Tobruk which may be of considerable advantage to him, not only from the supply point of view, but because he has no need to detach troops to contain it as was the case last year.

The considerations governing continued resistance in the frontier position at Sollum and south of it are set out, clearly I hope, in my signal to Deputy Prime Minister from Middle East Defence Committee which was repeated to you. In the circumstances this position is untenable against determined enemy attack because of our weakness in armour, and any attempt to hold other than with mobile forces which can evade encirclement must, in my opinion, result in further defeat of our forces in detail. I have, therefore, agreed to its evacuation by all except mobile forces whose task it is to maintain themselves in and about the frontier positions for as long as they can, and if forced to withdraw, to continue to keep the enemy as far to the westward as possible. Meanwhile the bulk of our infantry is occupying and organizing the Matruh position, where a new armoured reserve is also being built up as fast as possible so as to be ready to meet the enemy armour should he try to attack this position. The forces holding this position will comprise 50th Div. (two bdes only), 5th and 10th Ind. Divs (three bdes each) and N.Z. Div. (complete), also one or more of 1st, 7th and 10th Armd Divs

<sup>1</sup> Galloway had gone to London in the spring to take a senior staff appointment in the War Office.

according to the availability of tanks. 8th Armd Div. will be added to this force when it arrives, and after the necessary training to fit it to fight in the desert. We have learned by experience that troops fresh from U.K. are a liability rather than an asset in desert fighting, until they have had the requisite training. It is my firm intention to resume the offensive immediately our armoured forces are strong enough to give a reasonable chance of success, and far-reaching plans for reorganization to make our formations more suitable for the task they have to do are well advanced.

I have already drawn two and a third infantry divs from Ninth and Tenth Armies, besides one Corps H.Q. and signals, two armoured car regiments, one medium artillery regiment, two field artillery regiments and one anti-tank regiment. Not counting Polish, Greek, Free French and Transjordan contingents, which are not yet trained or equipped for battle, there remain in this vast area one and two-thirds Indian infantry divisions, one Indian armoured brigade group, just being issued with its tanks, one Indian armoured car regiment and the 9th Australian Division. I am prepared to take great risks, but must remind you of what occurred in Syria and Iraq and very nearly in Persia early in 1941 when the enemy began infiltrating by air into these countries. *Not one* of these countries is stable or yet sure of our ultimate victory. Quite apart from any question of resisting enemy attack, there is always present a grave risk of internal trouble which might well lead to incalculable damage to our bases and oil supplies, unless we have troops at hand to deal with it. I do NOT feel at the moment that I can draw any more troops from this area, nor do I think that the tactical situation in the west demands more infantry; what is required is more armour and this is NOT available from Ninth or Tenth Army fronts.

We are deeply grateful to you and to the President of the United States for the generous measure of help which you propose to give us and for the speed with which you are arranging to send it. The 2nd United States Armoured Division will indeed be a welcome reinforcement as will the Grant and Lee tanks diverted from India. Your assurance that the Indian infantry division and the Indian armoured brigade need not now be sent back to India will greatly ease my difficulties in regard to the internal security problem in Iraq and Persia, especially in the oil-field areas. Air Marshal Tedder informs me that the diversion of aircraft to this theatre . . . will strengthen our hands immensely, while the Halifax squadrons will greatly increase our offensive power in the air.

With regard to your para. four, I believe that practically without exception the troops in the Eighth Army are as determined to beat the enemy as ever they were, which is saying much, and that their spirit is unimpaired. As to accepting decisions brought about by enemy action, we will do all we can by improving our tactics and leadership to prevent their recurrence, but as you know, we are trying to train an army and use it on the battlefield at the same time. We are catching up but have NOT caught up yet. As to using all my manpower, I hope I am doing this, BUT infantry can NOT win battles in the desert so long as the enemy has superiority in armour, and nothing can be said or done to change this fact. Guns and armour and just enough infantry to give them and their supply organization local protection are what is needed. Masses of infantry are NO use without guns and armour. We can not have too many guns or too many tanks, and the tanks must be American medium tanks which can stand up to German tanks and NOT Crusaders with only two-pounder guns in them, though Crusaders with six-pounder guns should be all right.

I thank you personally most sincerely for all your help and support during the past year, and deeply regret the failures and setbacks of the past month for which I accept the fullest responsibility.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck* 25 June 1942. 07.55 hrs.

Do not have the slightest anxiety about course of affairs at home. Whatever views I may have about how the battle was fought or whether it should have been fought a good deal earlier, you have my entire confidence and I share your responsibilities to the full.

I have just shown your message to the President who was strongly moved and means to come to our aid. The difficulties about shipping the American armoured division, which are considerable, are in process of being flattened out. The Americans are also trying to send a large number of a new kind of anti-tank rocket gun of which they have great hopes. Meanwhile you have heard of the American air reinforcements which are already being directed to the Middle East. Plans are being formed to send another large wave, perhaps one hundred long-range bombers as fast as possible, also to hurry out to you further improved Grant tanks. Shall propose to President tomorrow placing an American general under your command, with a seat on the Middle East Council, observing that he would speak both for American air and army units.

Please tell Harwood that I am rather worried about reports of

undue despondency and alarm in Alexandria, and of the Navy hastening to evacuate to the Red Sea, although various precautionary moves may be taken and *Queen Elizabeth* should be got out at earliest. I trust a firm confident attitude will be maintained. The President's information from Rome is that Rommel expects to be delayed three or four weeks before he can mount a heavy attack on the Mersa Matruh position. I should think the delay might be greater.

I hope the crisis will lead to all uniformed personnel in the Delta and all available loyal [local ?] manpower being raised to the highest fighting condition. You have over 700,000 men on your ration strength in the Middle East. Every fit male should be made to fight and die for victory. There is no reason why units defending the Mersa Matruh position should not be reinforced by several thousands of officers and administrative personnel ordered to swell the battalions or working parties. You are in the same kind of situation as we should be if England were invaded and the same intense drastic spirit should reign.

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The fall of Tobruk brought to a head in the Parliament and Press of Great Britain the disquiet, amounting almost to distrust, of the War Cabinet's, in particular the Prime Minister's, direction of the war. Churchill, even before his brief visit to the United States, was aware of tremors which might develop into a political earthquake. There came, in the second World War as in the first, a period when the first impetus was expended, when there was a sense of deep disillusionment, of weariness with the privations, the danger, the loneliness and the suffering which are inevitably part of war, and of a dangerous slackening in the will to endure and fight on. Churchill, having lived through it once before, was especially sensitive to the perils of such a mood. Politicians and journalists, by the very nature of their callings, are both its victims and its exploiters. To the statesman in office there is nothing as irresponsible and as factious as this mood. It is democracy at its most recklessly powerful and its most unamiable. It is as infectious as it is difficult to contend with; it swirls through the smoking-room and the lobby, into clubs and private houses, into committee-rooms and editorial conferences. There are eddies of unusual and suspicious association. A muttered conversation in a dark corridor takes portentous shape as a series of banner headlines. An expression of hitherto unexpressed but genuine resentments and unfilled aspirations, the crisis is yet a



manufactured one; but its consequences can be real and far-reaching. It can destroy a Minister or a Government. There are only two ways in which a threatened individual statesman, or a threatened Cabinet, can break it: either by an immediate and resounding political or military victory, or by producing and drastically and publicly punishing an acceptable scapegoat—acceptable, that is, to the jackals who have smelt blood.

Churchill in 1942 was extremely vulnerable. He had exercised undisputed authority for over two years; apparently he still exerted it. But the deep political realities—as he, more than anyone else, was acutely conscious—were grimly different. The splendour of his leadership in 1940 had faded in the superficial and volatile memories of those whom he now must bring to heel again. He was the nominal leader of the Conservative Party, with its vast and normally well-disciplined majority at his back; but there existed in the party deep and strong undercurrents of suspicion and mistrust of him and his policies. The party had it in its power to overthrow him as suddenly as it had exalted him. In the inmost recesses of the Tory Party Churchill had never been completely accepted; it was in those recesses that he was in the gravest danger. On a more obvious and popular level he was virulently disliked by the demagogues of the extreme Left, who had found in the slogan, 'Second Front Now', (with all its implications of reactionary reluctance to aid the heroic Soviet Union, of stubborn prejudice and of cowardice) a surprisingly efficient weapon with which to assail him.

Had he, during his Washington visit, been able to bring off, in the matter of the supreme strategic direction of the war, a *coup* comparable to the previous year's Atlantic Charter on the politico-diplomatic plane, he would have greatly strengthened his position. This was his intention when he set forth. It is doubtful whether, even if Tobruk had not fallen, he could have fulfilled it. The Americans, with their natural and ineradicable distaste for failure, were smarting bitterly under the series of severe defeats in the Pacific and in south-east Asia, much of the blame for which—and much of the odium—they laid on the British. They were resolutely determined to fight their war in their own way. For all their courtesy, they were profoundly suspicious of Churchill and his retinue of advisers and staff officers. The news of Tobruk sharply reinforced their suspicions. Churchill, therefore, returned to the United Kingdom not indeed empty-handed, but without the assurance that the United States would complacently accept British leadership and guidance, now as hitherto, as he had sought. He had nothing tangible with which to calm and brace a restive House of Commons.

The longer Churchill remained out of England, the louder and the more dangerous grew the political storm. By Tuesday, June 23 it was of gale force. At a by-election at Maldon, in Essex, the Government candidate was defeated, in a sweeping turn-over of votes, by Mr. Tom Driberg, a left-wing journalist, who was extremely critical of Churchill and the Administration as a whole.

One member of the Administration pondered these matters, and thought of somebody other than himself, in graver straits.

*Secretary of State for India to General Auchinleck* 24 June 1942

I am afraid the fates have been adverse this time. But I am sure you are not discouraged and are only thinking of how and when to get your own back on Rommel and with interest.

The House of Commons yesterday did not show itself at its best. At the same time, to be fair to it, I should say its mood was not in any sense one of panic or of irresponsible looking for heads on chargers. It was rather one of anxiety to know where the original mistakes in equipment lay—on the part of most an anxiety really to find out, on the part of a few a conclusion already prejudged that our central planning organization is defective especially on the technical side. . . .

Winston will of course take up the challenge thrown out to him with usual vigour and fighting spirit when he comes back, and I am sure that the last thing he would do would be to suggest in any way that he has been let down at your end. I know he has the greatest admiration for you, and in any case he is never lacking in loyalty to his subordinates. . . .

Well anyhow here is the best of good luck to you for whatever you may be doing in the immediate future.

Leopold Amery was that rarity among politicians, a luminously honest as well as a passionately patriotic man. Occasionally, however, he tended to judge other politicians by his own high standards, and to expect of them niceties of honour to which they were, in fact, insensitive.

On the following day a motion was tabled in the House of Commons. It read: 'That this House, while paying tribute to the heroism and endurance of the Armed Forces of the Crown in circumstances of exceptional difficulty, has no confidence in the central direction of the war.'

The Prime Minister was still in Washington, but the challenge to his authority was direct and explicit. The status of those who made it was formidable. The motion stood in the name of Sir John

Wardlaw-Milne, the Conservative member for Kidderminster. He exerted great influence in the party, and considerable influence in the Commons as a whole. His relations with Churchill were formal and not especially friendly. He was, and had been since 1939, the chairman of the party's Foreign Affairs Committee, and as such had been an ardent supporter of the junta—Chamberlain, Halifax, Hoare and Simon—whose conduct of foreign policy Churchill had so vigorously and so wisely attacked. He was also the chairman of the most important and authoritative Select Committee of the House, that on national expenditure. He was the most powerful Conservative back-bencher of the day.

Two known supporters of the motion were Roger Keyes and Leslie Hore-Belisha. Keyes, by a speech in the Norway debate in 1940, had contributed greatly to the downfall of the Chamberlain Government; might he not do the same for its successor? Hore-Belisha, who had held no office since he had been dismissed as Secretary of State for War, was extremely knowledgeable and a first-rate debater, though his capacity to influence the House was a variable factor.

On the evening of June 25 Churchill and his party boarded a great Clipper flying boat at a quay in Baltimore. The Prime Minister knew that he was heading for one of the grimmest political battles of his career. How he fought it, and with what consequences, will be seen later.

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Thousands of miles away another eminent and venerated Prime Minister was in almost equal jeopardy. A considerable proportion of the Afrikaans-speaking population of the Union of South Africa regarded participation in the war with sullen distaste, if not open hostility. Smuts, in a country deeply divided on this fundamental issue, steered an intensely difficult course.

Smuts's son, who at that time was a serving officer in the South African forces under Auchinleck, said that the fall of Tobruk was a grievous blow to his father. His comments were significant:

It was obvious to all on the spot that Tobruk could never be held. The last-minute decision by the highest authority to hold it came as a complete surprise to us. This decision must either have come from Mr. Churchill or some very high body. The fact that my father, while opposed to the decision, never pressed the enquiry, may perhaps be significant.

And so on June 21 Tobruk fell. . . . It gave the Opposition endless grounds for criticism and it made many friendly households resentful. And above all, it cast a quite unwarranted stigma on the South African soldier, who became the scapegoat of a strategic error.<sup>1</sup>

*General Auchinleck to Field-Marshal Smuts 22 June 1942. 06.35 hrs.*

The enemy assault on Tobruk on June 20 developed with great speed and by 22.00 hrs enemy had gained possession of the portion of Tobruk occupied area east of Tobruk-El Adem road. Klopper reported that all his tanks were out of action and half his guns lost. Under the circumstances he asked Ritchie for permission to fight his way out. Ritchie immediately authorized him to do so. But later Klopper reported that almost all his M.T. had been captured by the enemy and consequently only a small proportion of the garrison could attempt to fight their way out. Before communication was finally closed with Eighth Army Klopper reported that organized resistance was breaking down and he was doing the worst, which Ritchie concluded was capitulation, and considered to be the only possible course. Report from Eighth Army received 19.30 hrs June 21 stated that yesterday morning there were indications that some posts are still holding out. It is too early yet to say whether any parts of garrison have broken out, but in view of the capture of so much of their M.T. by the enemy I do not expect that much will have come away.

Smuts himself at this time was a rock of fortitude and encouragement, but feelings and tempers ran high in the Union, both among politicians and in the newspapers, and the pressure on the Prime Minister was sustained for many weeks, without relaxation. Years of close personal friendship linked Smuts and Churchill, and in this time of stress they leaned to each other for mutual support and assistance.

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It was not without irony that Rommel, in the hour of his greatest triumph, was almost as beset by the complications and cross-currents of politics and high-level strategy as was Auchinleck in his bleakly different circumstances. For Rommel the interplay was just as exasperating as it was for Auchinleck. He reacted much more

<sup>1</sup> *Jan Christian Smuts* by J. C. Smuts, p. 417.

explosively, and with far less wisdom—let alone dignity and self-discipline. The newly appointed Field-Marshal was at his best and his worst immediately after the capture of Tobruk.

The Axis High Command had permitted him—with its customary misgivings and reluctance to go the whole hog—to undertake his Gazala offensive, which bore the code-name 'Aida',<sup>1</sup> on condition that, as soon as Tobruk fell, Operation 'Hercules' (the assault on Malta) would immediately be launched. O.K.W. and the Italian Commando Supremo were determined to hold Rommel to his pledge. He for his part was ablaze with eagerness to drive on and play out the final act of 'Aida'. On the afternoon of June 21 Kesselring arrived by air from Sicily for a conference, which was held in Panzer Army's command vehicle just outside Tobruk. Von Mellenthin, present in his capacity as Ia of Panzer Army, listened in fascination to the stormy argument. Rommel insisted that the opportunity of making an end of Eighth Army, broken and in full retreat, must not be thrown away. He said that he had sufficient supplies, captured at Tobruk, to take him to Cairo, and that a delay of only a few weeks would enable the British to regroup and recover. Kesselring drew his attention to the joint directive of the two Axis High Commands, and pointed out that the supplies for 'Aida', act one, had only been ferried across to Africa because Malta had been so badly hammered from the air; that when Luftwaffe squadrons were directed to support Rommel's offensive Malta came swiftly to life; and that Panzer Army's supplies were once more in jeopardy. Kesselring clinched the argument, on his side, by saying that he had ordered his air units back to Sicily.<sup>2</sup>

Rommel, in a raging temper, made two swift, audacious counter-moves. That evening he sent off a personal liaison officer to Germany to put his views before Hitler; and the following day, after an equally angry discussion at Bardia with the representatives of the Italian High Command, including General Bastico,<sup>3</sup> who was still in theory his superior officer, he sent a signal to the chief German military representative in Rome, von Rintelen, asking him to urge Mussolini to authorize his advance.

<sup>1</sup> A study of national differences in the invention of code-names suggests itself to the aspiring student.

<sup>2</sup> There may be some consolation in the realization that these disputes also occurred 'on the other side of the hill'.

<sup>3</sup> When the unfortunate Bastico ordered him to halt, Rommel said, 'I cannot accept the advice'; and then he aggravated the insult by asking Bastico to dine with him in Cairo. It is impossible to suppress a certain tug of compassion towards Bastico.

Since he was, in fact, pushing ahead with that advance as fast as he possibly could it was just as well that, having appealed to his two Caesars, he did get their approval—and with remarkable promptness.

In spite of misgivings on the part of his naval advisers, Hitler decided that Rommel must be allowed to follow up the success which he had achieved. He told Mussolini, who was only too eager to agree, that 'it is only once in a lifetime that the goddess of victory smiles'. Just after midnight on June 23-24 von Rintelen signalled Rommel:

Duce approves intention of Panzer Army to pursue enemy into Egypt. Cavallero will arrive in Africa on June 25 on behalf of Duce for discussion and issuing of new instructions. . . .

On June 25 Cavallero, with von Rintelen, met Kesselring at Derna; Kesselring had been ordered to restore his Luftwaffe squadrons to Rommel, and now, with certain reservations, he supported the idea of a triumphant finale to 'Aida'.

On June 26 Cavallero went up to Sidi Barrani to see Rommel, who was glowing with self-confidence. 'I count,' he said, 'on being in occupation of Cairo and Alexandria by June 30.'

Mussolini, his sense of the dramatic now thoroughly stirred, was quite intoxicated by the prospect so suddenly opening up before him. On June 27 he issued a directive ordering the seizure of Suez and the closure of the Canal. Two days later he arrived himself at Derna, piloting his own aircraft, with a white charger following in a transport aircraft (and, it was said, cases full of new uniforms), prepared to make his triumphal entry into Alexandria.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### ‘I am Going to Win’

ON the evening of June 22 the C.I.G.S., who had had a full day in Washington—a conference on the use of an American aircraft-carrier for convoy work and on the implications of sending a U.S. armoured division to the Middle East, lunch with Dill and a visit to Mount Vernon—noted in his diary:

Winston made me drive back with him to the White House in the President's car to discuss the need to relieve Neil Ritchie. I felt this was bound to come and was prepared for it. I am devoted to Neil and hate to think of the disappointment this will mean to him.<sup>1</sup>

Early that morning Auchinleck, accompanied by Dorman-Smith, had flown up to Eighth Army Headquarters, now at Bagush, east of Mersa Matruh, not—even yet—to relieve Ritchie of his command, but to sustain and help him. Auchinleck agreed that Eighth Army was not strong enough to defend the Egyptian frontier, and therefore directed its withdrawal to a battle front on a north-south line through Mersah Matruh where there were prepared ‘defended localities’ on a wide front, covered partially by mine-fields. He also arranged that 30th Corps Headquarters and the 1st South African Division should go back to El Alamein and reorganize, while a new Corps Headquarters just arrived from Syria—10th Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General W.G. Holmes—took hold of Matruh.

He returned to Cairo. Early next morning he sent this telegram:

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*23 June 1942*

The unfavourable course of the recent battle in Cyrenaica culminating in the disastrous fall of Tobruk impels me to ask you seriously to consider the advisability of retaining me in my command. No doubt you are already considering this and quite

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 410.

rightly, but I want you to know that I also realize the probable effects of the past month's fighting. Personally I feel fit to carry on and reasonably confident of being able to turn the tables on the enemy in time. All the same there is no doubt that in a situation like the present, fresh blood and new ideas at the top may make all the difference between success and stalemate. . . . After steeping oneself for months in the same subject all day and every day one is apt to get into a groove and to lose originality. For this theatre originality is essential and a change is quite probably desirable on this account alone, apart from all other considerations such as loss of influence due to lack of success, absence of luck and all the other things which affect the morale of an army. It occurred to me that you might want to use Alexander who is due here in a day or two. Personally I do not think Wilson could do it now, but he might. I have thought over this a lot and feel I must tell you what I think.

During the night Gott moved 13th Corps Headquarters and what remained of his infantry swiftly and unobtrusively away to the east. Panzer Army was not far behind. For Rommel had not bothered to wait for authorization of his new plan. By the evening of Sunday the 21st he had already reached Gambut; he then turned south, and, when Gott withdrew, the Afrika Korps were a few miles west of Sidi Omar. On the evening of June 23 they were at the Frontier north of Maddalena. In the next twenty-four hours they covered well over a hundred miles and reached the coast road far to the east of Sidi Barrani. The advance was made with no ground opposition of any significance, but under frequent attack from the air, recorded in the German war diary with the gloomy addendum, 'Nothing was to be seen of our own Luftwaffe.' As the British retreat gathered momentum there was only fleeting contact between German advance reconnaissance units and the armoured cars which provided a rearguard. The New Zealand Division, having hurried back from Syria, was already in position at Matruh, and Kippenberger recorded:

Eighth Army poured back through us, not looking at all demoralized except for the black South African drivers but thoroughly mixed up and disorganized. I did not see a single formal fighting unit, infantry, armour or artillery.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Infantry Brigadier* by Maj.-Gen. Sir Howard Kippenberger, p. 126.



That their morale was not lost was to the credit of individual officers and men. But in these confused, climactic days the system of command in Eighth Army had, to all intents and purposes, broken down. Easy, breezy optimism and amateurishness were now taking their toll; under stress the relations between some senior commanders and some staff officers were stripped of superficial, perhaps artificial, cordiality. It was a tactically correct decision—made by Ritchie and supported by Auchinleck of June 22—not to attempt to make a stand against Rommel at the Frontier. But the atmosphere in which it was implemented in the higher echelons of Eighth Army was far from agreeable. Ritchie, it was true, retained his courtesy and distinction of bearing throughout. Freyberg, with some justification, was brusquely condemnatory of the mess and muddle which he and his division had been summoned to clear up. Pienaar, of 1st South African Division, was caustic and outspoken about the position at El Hamra which he was bidden to hold, and withdrew to the east.

The fate of 10th Indian Division, ever since they had been brought over in haste from Iraq and thrust into the heart and heat of the Gazala battle—not as a division but piecemeal, brigade by brigade—had been hard. During the Axis onslaught on Tobruk, the commander of the division, T. W. ('Pete') Rees, endeavoured to assemble and regroup the remnants of his battered units. On the day that Tobruk fell, Gott telephoned Rees from 13th Corps H.Q., ordering him to hold the Sollum–Capuzzo position for a period of seventy-two hours.

Rees explained that his division had been considerably knocked about and had only just concentrated in a position whose defence works were far from complete, and that he doubted whether they would be able to hold it for seventy-two hours against a full-scale Axis attack. Gott rang off, remarking that he would shortly come to see Rees.

He arrived six hours later, tense and overwrought. He handed Rees a piece of paper and bade him read it. Rees, dumbfounded, read that, in Gott's view, he did not possess the necessary resolution and firmness for his task, and he was therefore ordered to hand over his command immediately. Since it did not lie within the competence of a corps commander to dismiss a divisional commander, the matter was referred to the Commander-in-Chief, Auchinleck, who well knew, and had the highest opinion of, Rees's efficiency, indomitable courage and fighting spirit, yet had no other course than to support Gott. This was on Sunday, June 21. On Tuesday, June 23 Eighth Army abandoned Sollum. Rees went back to Cairo

and was put, by Auchinleck, in command of all the defence arrangements for the city which Rommel intended to occupy by June 30.

Messervy, through many tribulations and grievous losses, had commanded 7th Armoured Division since the beginning of the battle. On June 23 Auchinleck, at Ritchie's request, relieved Messervy of his command and replaced him by Brigadier J. M. L. Renton, a Rifle Brigade officer who (as he told the C.I.G.S. in a telegram reporting the step, and asking that it be confirmed quickly) had great experience of Western Desert fighting with the division, and had done very well in the recent operations.<sup>1</sup>

For forty-eight hours Auchinleck pondered the crisis in all its implications, tactical, strategic and moral. His meditations were not a picking-over of the past—that could be left to others in some easier time, when the heat of the day was over—but a realistic appraisal of the tasks which faced him in the immediate future. If he faltered now, he could lose Egypt and the whole Middle East—perhaps lose the war itself, but without doubt put off victory for years.

Another percipient observer had been closely watching the movement of events—Tedder, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief. Aware that both Ritchie and Whiteley, his B.G.S., were tired out, Tedder pressed Auchinleck to assume personal command of Eighth Army. On the night of June 24 Auchinleck and he agreed on a course of action. It was arranged that Tedder should fly up to Bagush in the early afternoon of June 25, and that Auchinleck should arrive an hour or two later and take over. Tedder duly flew up; and as he talked to Ritchie his belief that a decision was of the utmost urgency was confirmed.

\* \* \*

Early on the morning of June 25 Tom Corbett telephoned Eric Dorman-Smith at the Continental Hotel in Cairo and told him to make ready at once to go to the Desert for a long time. After he had packed and stored his excess kit, the D.C.G.S. reported at G.H.Q. Corbett said that the Commander-in-Chief had decided to take over field command himself in the Desert, and that he (Dorman-Smith) was to accompany the Chief as a general factotum, and that they were leaving Cairo by air that afternoon.

<sup>1</sup> It is to be emphasized that both Rees and Messervy continued their careers with distinction and attained well-merited fame in Burma and India. Both were officers of the Indian Army.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*25 June 1942. 09.05 hrs.*

Am taking over command Eighth Army from Ritchie this afternoon. Propose send him on leave temporarily to Palestine but consider he should go home soon as possible and be given command of a corps or a General Staff appointment. I feel that, though sound and resolute, he is apt to be slow and I fear Army has to some extent lost confidence in him. Shall use Dorman-Smith as my Chief of Staff leaving Corbett to represent me at G.H.Q.

Dorman-Smith had a brain bubbling with ideas. Though he was profoundly different in character and outlook from his Chief, they had two qualities in common—unabated zest in life and the utmost disrespect for useless convention. When Auchinleck could spare a moment to see him, Dorman-Smith offered the first of many suggestions that were to occur to him in the eventful days and weeks which followed.

'Even the condemned man,' he said, 'has one good last meal. What about us?'

Auchinleck smiled. When lunch-time came, the two of them went off to the Mohammed Ali Club, of which they were honorary members. Neither can remember what they had, but they fed magnificently. They drove out to the airfield. Comfortably conscious of physical well-being and slightly sleepy, they boarded the aircraft. If a German fighter had spotted it as it headed west over the sun-burnished desert and these last unexpected reinforcements for Eighth Army had been shot down, Rommel would have been in Cairo on his target date, and Mussolini would have had his victorious ride into Alexandria. Funny as the latter has always seemed in retrospect, it might have been a sombre reality.

It happened that, at the beginning of the long story of advance and withdrawal in the Western Desert, Dorman-Smith had been with Dick O'Connor on the morning of 7 February 1941, when the Italian General Bergonzoli, with the whole of Mussolini's Tenth Army, surrendered. As O'Connor's staff car rocked across the bumpy coastal plain of Cyrenaica to the sea, with herds of gazelle galloping in front, Dorman-Smith said, 'Dick, what does it feel like to win a complete victory?'

O'Connor answered, 'I'll never believe I'm a successful general until I've carried my forces through a retreat.'

Now it was Dorman-Smith's fate, not as an observer but as a responsible subordinate, to watch Auchinleck setting out to carry a beaten, disorganized and scattered army through the last phases

of a long retreat. Would he prove himself to be a great general by O'Connor's exacting standards? They were all—Auchinleck, Dorman-Smith and O'Connor—to be given the answer to that question in due course.

Their aircraft touched down at Bagush in the late afternoon. Auchinleck walked, alone, to Neil Ritchie's caravan. He talked at length, frankly and sadly, to Ritchie and Whiteley.

Tedder's aircraft was still on the strip. Auchinleck went across and told Tedder of the action he proposed to take. Tedder said long afterwards:

I was deeply impressed by the quick and clear grasp he had secured of an extremely confused and indeed dangerous situation and by the clear-cut and decisive orders he was issuing.<sup>1</sup>

Ritchie got into his car and drove off to Cairo.

Of course Auchinleck ought to have intervened earlier. Of course Ritchie had been given a task beyond his experience and beyond his capacity. Of course the relationship between the two men, which in December had seemed so full of understanding, promise and co-operation, had in June tailed off in confusion, defeat and sorrow. A heavy penalty had to be paid by both men—and by many others under their command—for the mistakes which both had made. Brave men were dead, or eating their hearts out in prison camps. Afterwards—but not by Auchinleck or by Ritchie—there would be explanations and excuses, charges and counter-charges. Truth would be buried under a vast edifice of falsehoods—but they at least took no part in the building of that edifice. The chain of cause and effect, of responsibility and blame, was a complex one, with many links, stretching a long, long way. But here, in that dust-swirled sunset, there was truth. There were no recriminations. There was seemliness, courtesy and a great grief.

Ritchie went to Palestine and then to Syria, to stay with Maitland Wilson. All who knew him liked Ritchie. He had not the stuff of greatness in him, either in victory or in disaster, but he was neither unintelligent nor insensitive. Severe criticism of much of his conduct as an Army commander there must be, but none of his motives or intentions. The last of many letters from Ritchie to Auchinleck, preserved in two bulky files, was written in Cairo on July 12. Let it stand not as a refutation of justified criticism of both the writer and the recipient, but as a grace-note of soldierly quality, decency and affection.

<sup>1</sup> A communication from Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder.

My dear Chief,

I am due to leave tomorrow for home and am sorry that I have not seen you again before my departure.

This is just to bid you au revoir, for I hope I may serve you again some day. It will still be a long-drawn-out struggle, but I know you will win however hard the battle may prove to be.

Perhaps I can be of some use at home even if all I can do is to do something towards getting those who matter there to understand the equipment aspect—guns and A.F.V.s.

This last fortnight has been the greatest hell; this feeling that one was doing nothing to help in shouldering some little part of the burden that rests on you

I know the Eighth Army will win.

Yours ever,

NEIL.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

*Deputy Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

25 June 1942

War Cabinet are glad to know that you have gone forward to take command of Eighth Army. They have every confidence in you and in your gallant troops, and in your ability to stop the enemy at Matruh and in due course to drive him back.

But in the aircraft flying up from Cairo Auchinleck had already made his first major decision. He would not make the final stand at Matruh, but would keep the Eighth Army fully mobile and bring Rommel's advance to a halt in the area between Matruh, El Alamein and the Qattara Depression. As he put it in his despatch: 'In no circumstances was any part of the Eighth Army to be allowed to be shut up in Matruh, even if this involved abandoning the position entirely.'

Auchinleck's motive for this decision was his desire to gain time—time to bring more tanks up from the workshops, time for the R.A.F. to settle down and work from new airfields, time to bring the 9th Australian Division from Syria, time to concentrate all the remaining field and medium artillery under centralized command.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. Ritchie has been described by Lord Alanbrooke as 'a very fine man who did a wonderful come-back after suffering a serious blow'. Between 1942 and 1945 he commanded first a division and then a corps; he was G.O.C.-in-C. Scottish Command from 1945 to 1947, and C.-in-C. Far East Land Forces, 1947-9. He retired in 1951 as Gen. Sir Neil Ritchie, G.B.E.

Holmes, the commander of the newly-raised 10th Corps, alert, confident and fresh. He reported that Afrika Korps were nearing his front, that the last rearguard screen of Eighth Army was still withdrawing, and that his engineers were still working to close a six-mile gap in the mine-field in front of his positions. He believed, he added, that Rommel would launch his attack on him tomorrow.

Holmes was right. It was Rommel's intention to attack on June 26, and he proposed to take Matruh as he had taken Gazala and Tobruk. Since he believed himself to be directly opposed by Ritchie, he had every reason to assume that the trick that had worked twice before would work once again. But his Intelligence, which had so often served him so well, was on this occasion greatly at fault. Rommel believed that behind the mine-fields (which stretched some fifteen miles southward from the sea) there were four infantry divisions—the 50th, the New Zealand, 5th and 10th Indian Divisions—and that their left flank was covered by 1st Armoured Division lying between the main mine-fields and the escarpment. In fact Ritchie's dispositions, which Auchinleck had not the time change, were (as has been indicated) quite different; what Eighth Army had was a weak centre, with two very strong wings. However, working on his wrong assumption, Rommel sought—exactly as he had done at Gazala—to encircle the infantry. His first object, therefore, was to drive off 1st Armoured Division. This was to be the task of the Afrika Korps. 21st Panzer were to advance between the escarpment and the main mine-field, while 15th Panzer moved south of the escarpment. 90th Light were to thrust on 21st Panzer's left flank and cut the coast road to the east of Mersa Matruh; the Italian Xth and XXIst Corps were to contain the western front of what Rommel thought to be 'the Matruh Fortress', and the Italian armour, which had not yet caught up with Rommel's rapid advance, was to move south of the escarpment in support of 15th Panzer. Von Mellenthin remarked: 'There was no time for serious reconnaissance and we entered on the battle with only the vaguest idea of the British dispositions.'<sup>1</sup>

Military writers criticized Rommel on his side, and Auchinleck on his, for their conduct of the battle of Mersa Matruh. Rommel was in a tearing hurry, full of confidence and contemptuous of his opponent. Auchinleck came to personal grips with the situation only late on the evening of June 25; he had no time in which to change the dispositions, which manifested all Eighth Army's familiar

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 121.

From the moment that he went up to Bagush Auchinleck was working in a dual capacity. His wide responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief gave him a strategic authority and control which an officer solely commanding Eighth Army could never have possessed. It would, however, be wrong for him to abandon that control, for he had left no Deputy C.-in-C. in Cairo, only Corbett—conscientious and diligent as he was—to deal with the array of detailed and difficult questions which presented themselves.

What forces in fact had he, as Commander-in-Chief, at his disposal to fight the imminent—though not the finally decisive—battle?

He listed them in his despatch:

The 10th Corps had assumed command at Matruh about twenty-four hours earlier and was organizing the defence with the 10th Indian Division, which had just arrived. The New Zealand Division was being organized into battle groups and concentrating round Minqar Qaim, about twenty-five miles south of Matruh, for use in a mobile role under the 13th Corps. The 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions were also under command of the 13th Corps. The 1st Armoured Division had taken command of the 4th and 2nd Armoured Brigades which were disposed to the south of Minqar Qaim, while the 7th Armoured Division, with the 3rd Indian and 7th Motor Brigades, was in touch with the enemy west of El Kanayis. The 69th Infantry Brigade of the 50th Division was withdrawing from Sidi Barrani on Matruh in contact with the enemy.

The 30th Corps Headquarters was organizing the defence of El Alamein. The 1st South African Division held the important fortifications round El Alamein railway station, and the 2nd Free French Brigade Group lay farther to the south. The infantry made surplus by the organization of battle groups were being sent back from the forward zone to help in preparing the El Alamein position.

The weaknesses lay in lack of artillery—who, for example, could give Eighth Army back those four regiments that had disappeared in the Cauldron?—and in lack of armour. The only effective armoured force of any size left to Auchinleck was 1st Armoured Division, with 159 tanks, of which sixty were Grants.

As Auchinleck sat in the caravan which was to be his home and his Headquarters for many weeks to come, his first visitor was

failings—above all that of unnecessary, indeed inexplicable, dispersal. It had to be another—but the last—of Eighth Army's huggemugger, unco-ordinated, muddled and short-sighted battles.

There was an underground operations room at Bagush (O'Connor had used it when he planned his first advance in 1940). When Holmes had gone, Auchinleck walked across to it in the swiftly deepening dusk. It was a grimly unrewarding experience for him to gaze at the battle-map and know that since, at the moment, he had no hard-hitting general reserve, uncommitted to any specific task in the battle, there was nothing he could do to alter its course. Its conduct must be left, as the conduct of all the major engagements since Gazala had been left, to the corps commanders. No one—least of all the corps commanders—could extract satisfaction from what had happened.

Auchinleck sent for Dorman-Smith, who—as always—was bubbling with ideas. They were excellent ideas; it was high time that some keen intelligence, both critical and creative, was applied to operations in the Western Desert, instead of valour and jolly-good-showism. But in the complicated relationship which must exist between a field commander and his chief of staff there is one cardinal rule: that if one of them is thinking about the immediately forthcoming battle, the other must be pondering the battle after that. Unfortunately it was inevitable, on this occasion, that both Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith should be concentrating on the battle after next.

Dorman-Smith rattled off his suggestions. Would Auchinleck agree that the artillery should be regrouped under the highest possible control? That the army should not over-extend itself by attempting to stretch across the thirty-six-mile gap between the sea and the Qattara Depression, however attractive this might appear as an untenable flank? That henceforth the Eighth Army should fight its battles as an army, and not as two loosely connected corps, as was about to happen on the morrow? That the armour should be regrouped, separating the remaining Grants from the lighter cruisers, which were singularly ill-adapted to head-on conflict with Panzer Army, but could be useful in a more mobile role on the flank? That the three armoured-car regiments should be grouped in a light armoured brigade, operating with 7th Armoured Division on the outer, southern flank? That the Grants should operate close-hauled to the main front and not go beyond field artillery support from the main position? And finally, there was the matter of Rommel's Italian infantry, which he had avoided committing except when they had been protected from rough



handling by a mine-field. If Eighth Army stood at El Alamein, Dorman-Smith argued, where there were no mine-fields, Rommel, whether he wished it or not, would have to bring his Italian infantry into the front line. When he did, why not attack them, hitting Rommel where he was weak rather than where he was strong?

Auchinleck approved all these refreshing policies and went to his caravan. But before they could be put into practice, there was Mersa Matruh to be fought in the old-fashioned style.

Eighth Army H.Q. moved eastwards before first light. It was just as well, for Bagush was the main objective of Rommel's approaching right hook, and Afrika Korps reached it two days later.

The weak centre of the British dispositions, referred to earlier, was the ten-mile gap between the escarpment and the main Matruh mine-fields. Here there was only a thin mine-field, protected by two columns—their present formation was 29th Indian Brigade—called Gleecol and Leathercol, each consisting of two platoons of infantry and a battery of field and anti-tank artillery. 'Purely by chance', as von Mellenthin candidly admitted, Rommel's assault, launched on the afternoon of June 26, fell on this weak centre. 90th Light Division scampered through the mine-field and annihilated Leathercol. 21st Panzer Division fell on the equally hapless Gleecol. At a single stroke the way had been laid open for a deep thrust on the following day. Luck—for a few more days—was still with Rommel.

90th Light Division swung north-east and reached the coastal road, some twenty miles east of Matruh. 21st Panzer Division drove eastward, divided into two columns, and prepared to attack what Rommel thought was merely the 1st Armoured Division, for which he entertained little respect. These two columns—they amounted to twenty-three tanks and some six hundred very tired infantry—worked round north of Minqar Qaim and moved in on it from the north-east and the south-east. Rommel was in fact giving battle to the whole of Gott's 13th Corps. 22nd Armoured Brigade held up the advance of 15th Panzer south of the escarpment; and when, at about 09.00 hours, the New Zealanders at Minqar Qaim itself (a position which Kippenberger succinctly described as 'very odd') saw 21st Panzer some seven miles to the north in the desert haze, there began a long day of fierce fighting. Freyberg was severely wounded; and he is remembered as standing up in the whirling dust and smoke of the battlefield, his throat swathed in blood-soaked bandages, shouting in a high voice, 'By God, another Balaclava!'

There was a repetition of the old failure, on the British side, in co-operation between armour and infantry. However, largely because of the stubborn gallantry of the New Zealanders, by the

evening of June 27 Rommel, as impetuous as always, had got himself into a very dangerous position. 21st Panzer could make no headway in its attack on the New Zealanders, and was in danger of being permanently cut in two. Two British armoured regiments came in to attack them, the Bays from the east and the 3rd County of London from the west. They were separated from 15th Panzer, whose advance had been blocked by 22nd Armoured Brigade, and they were very short of ammunition and fuel. Rommel himself, with his mobile H.Q., went north to goth Light, some fifteen miles away, and then at 17.22 hours, regardless of his danger and contemptuous of his opponents, ordered 21st Panzer 'to stand by in the late evening to pursue the enemy' to Fuka, where the escarpment sloped down to the plain stretching eastwards to El Alamein and Alexandria.

Eighth Army Headquarters, having passed relatively scatheless through several dive-bombing attacks on the way, were now at El Daba. Here Auchinleck 'received and noted the news of the German advance with the cool self-possession which was probably his most valuable contribution to the Eighth Army at this time'.<sup>1</sup> He signalled the C.I.G.S.: 'Situation so far satisfactory,' and recorded with approval that counter-attacks were to be made by 10th Corps south of Matruh, and by 7th Motor Brigade against the rear of the Afrika Korps. He laid renewed stress on that mobility which was to keep Eighth Army in being, and on his willingness to abandon Matruh rather than see the bulk of his remaining forces shut up there.

This proper insistence on mobility, which he also emphasized to Gott and Holmes, combined with a serious break-down in communications between both Corps Headquarters and Eighth Army Headquarters to give Rommel his last stroke of luck. Gott was undoubtedly influenced by the Commander-in-Chief's firm exposition of this fundamental principle. During the afternoon of June 27 he ordered independently a withdrawal of 13th Corps which radically altered the whole situation. Panzer Army could have been shattered. Instead:

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*28 June 1942*

Gott reported in the afternoon that owing to enemy southward move against N.Z. eastern flank he did not feel it safe to stay in area Sidi Hamzar-Minqar Qaim and would withdraw towards Fuka line in conformity with my original conception. 10th Corps, therefore, ordered by me to conform.

The signal conveying this order, however, was not despatched

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 257.

until 22.00 hours on July 27, and, as a consequence of the communications chaos, was only received at 10th Corps H.Q. at 04.30 hours on the morning of June 28. During that night 1st Armoured Division had withdrawn south of 21st Panzer, but the New Zealanders had broken clean through them, inflicting very serious losses on the Axis infantry in bitter hand-to-hand fighting. Maitland Wilson, in the course of an enquiry held some weeks afterwards into this episode, observed, '13th Corps just disappeared and left 10th Corps up the pole'.

On June 28 Auchinleck had Brooke's answer to his own signal of June 23, suggesting that he should be replaced by Alexander. Brooke was by this time back in London.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

27 June 1942

Prime Minister had already despatched his telegram expressing his entire confidence in you before receipt of your telegram now under reply. He has reaffirmed his confidence in you and I share his views. My thoughts are with you in the difficult situation which confronts you. My best wishes and good luck.

During June 28, 90th Light and the Italian divisions invested Mersa Matruh and prepared to capture it, as just a week earlier they had captured Tobruk. The Afrika Korps continued their advance eastwards to Fuka. In the evening 21st Panzer reached the escarpment overlooking Fuka, overwhelmed the remnants of the gallant 29th Indian Brigade, and captured two trainloads of bombs and a good deal of transport.

On the night of June 28-29, 10th Corps H.Q., 50th Division and 10th Indian Division broke out of Matruh to the south. This enterprise, said von Mellenthin, led to violent clashes between the British columns and the Axis troops striving to keep them besieged. In spite of heavy losses the bulk of 10th Corps got through—'not a very numerous bulk,' commented Dorman-Smith, von Mellenthin's opposite number, 'but even so with insufficient transport to carry all its men and weapons'.

One British column was so unkind as to choose a route through Panzer Army Battle Headquarters. Rommel, in the ensuing turmoil, thought that he was fighting New Zealanders, but Freyberg was chafing in hospital and the New Zealand Division, temporarily commanded by Brigadier Inglis, were far away to the east, in excellent order, preparing to man the El Alamein defences. 'The confusion reigning on that night,' said Rommel, 'can scarcely be

imagined,' and von Mellenthin had vivid recollections of blazing away with a sub-machine-gun in the mêlée.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck's Headquarters on the same night, still well west of El Alamein, were in no less jeopardy, with only a light film of rear-guard between them and the enemy, but were undisturbed. Auchinleck, unruffled but grim, had already decided that this was the last retreat, the last reverse to which Eighth Army should be submitted. Some time on the afternoon of June 27 he had halted his car by the side of the coastal road and watched the long stream of vehicles pouring eastward. An official photographer asked permission to take some pictures of him. His bush-jacket and shorts had lost the starch of the Cairo launderers. He was capless and his hair was ruffled by the desert wind. It was thus, a man alone in his hour of challenge and resolution, that the men of Eighth Army, when their battle was done and victory hammered out of defeat, would remember Auchinleck.

His principal staff officer—the appointment, it must be admitted, having hitherto been unthought of in the British Army, savoured of irregularity, and the extent to which it incurred the displeasure of those displaced but not relieved of their posts was difficult to gauge—spent the morning of June 28 composing a penetrative assessment of the whole situation as seen from Eighth Army H.Q., but with the Commander-in-Chief's strategic responsibilities held in mind. Auchinleck approved it that afternoon and it was despatched that night.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*28 June 1942. 20.00 hrs.*

Appreciation situation regarding defence of Egypt.

1. Enemy in Western Desert is still markedly superior to Eighth Army in tanks. Owing to absence of natural obstacles to mechanized movement and ease with which given superior tank force desert flank of all positions, except El Alamein-Qattara Depression line, can be turned, armour still remains dominant factor governing retention of initiative.

2. Enemy: Has gained all recent successes with his three German divisions. Italians have played minor part. His tactics have been excellent while his adherence to first principles, speed of movement and ability to keep forward troops supplied have been most remarkable. His leaders are well trained and know how to react to situations usually to be expected in battle. Success will have greatly heightened German morale locally, but nationally his morale is steadily deteriorating, so that with an end of success he is

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 124.

likely to go to other extreme. Italian morale will also be higher, but their reaction will be even greater should the tide turn. So far as we know enemy is unlikely to get much more in reinforcements of material and men, but hope of gaining Egypt might lead to diversion of forces even from Russia. Against this his sea communications with Libya are again becoming precarious and he is always experiencing scarcity of one commodity or another. Occupation of Egypt would greatly ease his supply problem. His ability to keep his forces supplied should he try to advance against the Delta can not be accurately forecast, but he has done great things already and has captured much of our transport, so we must be prepared for this.

3. Object: Our object must be at all costs to prevent the enemy stopping our supply of men and material through the Red Sea ports before we have rebuilt an adequate armoured force to regain initiative and resume offensive. Also essential to prevent his increasing his armoured forces in Libya, and this entails maximum interference with his sea communications.

4. Sea Communications: Retention of Malta and Alexandria and of aerodromes as far west as possible in Egypt is essential if we are seriously to interrupt enemy sea communications with Libya.

5. Air Strength: We cannot resume the offensive on land until we have rebuilt our armoured forces to the required strength. Meanwhile our only offensive weapon is our air striking force which it is essential to maintain at the maximum possible strength, as it alone enables us to retain any semblance of the initiative.

6. Intention: My intention, with which A.O.C.-in-C. is in full agreement, is to keep Eighth Army in being as a mobile field force and resist by every possible means any further attempt by the enemy to advance eastwards.

7. Method:

(i) Utmost delay possible without entailing encirclement or destruction of Eighth Army will be imposed on enemy on Fuka line and then on El Alamein position.

(ii) Should withdrawal from El Alamein position be forced on us: Eighth Army (less 1st S.A. Div.) will withdraw along 'Barrel Track' leading from Deir el Qattara to Cairo and continue to oppose enemy, should he try to advance on Cairo direct. 1st S.A. Div., now holding El Alamein defended area, will withdraw on Alexandria.

(iii) 1st S.A. Div., 9th Aus. Div., and improvised forces and columns now forming in Delta will constitute Delta Force under Lieutenant-General Stone, and be responsible for defence of

western edge of Delta, for fighting enemy step by step if he penetrates Delta, and for defending Alexandria.

(iv) If enemy moves along coast on Alexandria, Eighth Army will attack his southern flank and rear. If he moves direct on Cairo, Delta Force will attack his northern flank and rear.

(v) Meanwhile striking force will be built up ready to assume offensive by 'Barrel Track', or coast road, or both, according to situation.

(vi) If driven from El Alamein position I shall assume direct control of both Eighth Army and Delta Force with an improvised operational H.Q. outside Cairo. Lieutenant-General Corbett will take over Eighth Army.

A brief telegram from Churchill crossed the signal containing this appreciation.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*28 June 1942*

I am very glad you have taken command. Do not vex yourself with anything except the battle. Fight it out wherever it flows. Nothing matters but destroying the enemy's armed and armoured forces. A strong stream of reinforcements is approaching. We are sure you are going to win in the end.

On the morning of June 29, 90th Light Division occupied Mersa Matruh; two thousand miles westward Alan Brooke had a difficult session under cross-examination by the War Cabinet, with the Minister of Labour, Mr. Ernest Bevin, 'full of uneducated, peevish questions about the Middle East operations, continually asking questions on points that I had just explained'.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of the orders based on the appreciation of June 28 caused a considerable stir. The appreciation itself was sensible and realistic; the orders went no further than the appreciation. They were, however, widely misinterpreted, and this misinterpretation led to a great deal of subsequent misunderstanding of the gravest and most deleterious character.

A circumstantial account of the beginnings of the misconception was given by Kippenberger. During June 29 he was acting commander of his division—Inglis being in Cairo for the day—and visited Gott's Headquarters in quest of operational orders.

Gott handed him a letter, which proved to be a short note from Corbett. The first sentence, according to Kippenberger's

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 418.

recollection, read: 'The Chief has decided to save Eighth Army.' It then went on to say that the South Africans would retire through Alexandria and the rest of the army down the Desert road through Cairo.

Kippenberger asked Gott to explain. Gott went into scarifying detail: a general retirement and evacuation of Egypt were being prepared; Inglis's mission in Cairo was to arrange for the evacuation of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force's rear installations and hospital; and Gott supposed that the division itself would go back to New Zealand. Kippenberger protested that the division was perfectly fit, and argued that it would be 'criminal' to give Egypt to 25,000 German troops and a hundred tanks (disregarding the Italians), and to lose as prisoners perhaps 200,000 base troops. Gott said mournfully that, though the New Zealanders might be battle-worthy, few others were, and that he 'feared the worst'.

Kippenberger went back to his division, and in the evening received a provisional order from 13th Corps covering the retirement. It certainly envisaged, he said, the abandonment of Egypt.

Kippenberger's evidence is not to be discounted. But the stress on providing for the possibility of orderly retreat, after weeks of helter-skelter, disorderly and unexpected retreat, proved to be unwarranted, though in the circumstances natural enough. Men who had retreated so long in surprise and confusion were not immediately capable of appreciating that a new factor had entered their lives—the stoical, subtle, strong will of the Commander-in-Chief. Nor were they in a state of mind immediately receptive to the idea that making prudent preparations against the worst possible contingencies is by no means analogous with accepting those contingencies as inevitable. Gott's reaction, as recorded by Kippenberger, was of especial significance, and must be considered in the light of his own recent record. Eight days had passed since the fall of Tobruk, one of the principal causes of which, at the operational level, was his own grievously mistaken advice to Ritchie. In the meantime he had himself, by withdrawing overnight, suddenly and without warning, precipitated another major reverse at Mersa Matruh. He was a baffled, tired man, with great cause to mourn, and sound, if sad, reasons for lack of confidence in himself.

Whoever else lost his head, however, Auchinleck kept his. He was canny and calm. Though he thought it possible that Rommel might show signs of orthodoxy, and consolidate his weary and over-extended formations in the area between Mersa Matruh and Bagush (90th Light, rather forlornly, expected a few days' sea-bathing at Matruh), he realized grimly that, as he told London, 'we must

expect him to go on thrusting eastward as strongly as possible and are planning for this'.

His despatch supplied a brief, rigidly objective account of the end of confusion, disaster and retreat:

The enemy continued to press forward along the coast, and, in spite of the vigorous opposition of the 13th Corps, reached Sidi Abd el Rahman, only fifteen miles west of El Alamein on the evening of June 29. On June 30 I ordered our armoured and motor brigades, which were still operating far to the west and well behind the line reached by the enemy's advanced elements, to withdraw into reserve.

The 13th Corps took over the southern half of the El Alamein-Qattara Depression line, with what was left of the New Zealand and 5th Indian Divisions, while the 30th Corps, with the 50th and 1st South African Divisions, concentrated on the defence of the northern sector and especially of the El Alamein fortifications. Not needing a third corps headquarters on the El Alamein position, I sent General Holmes with his 10th Corps staff back to command Delta Force which was forming in Egypt, to defend Alexandria and the western edge of the Delta.

\* \* \*

The eve of one of the world's decisive battles had come. Such occasions are customarily dramatic. There was no lack of drama before the first battle of El Alamein, but it was not in the conventional manner. All the aggressively star performers of World War II were off-stage, though the poor buffoon, Mussolini, was waiting nervously in the wings.

Two small armies—small, that is, by comparison with the grandiose aggregations of men and armaments that were fashionable in World Wars I and II—thousands of miles from their home countries, faced each other across a narrow strip of one of the earth's most barren wastelands. The veterans in both these armies had fought each other back and forth across this Desert for more than a twelve-month. Bitterly contesting the tenure of many a bare, rock-strewn hillside, they had come inevitably to regard their conflict as the only reality in the world, an end in itself. Their present battle had endured for a month, and had tested both sides to the utmost and beyond. They were brave, weary, battle-hardened soldiers, intent now upon certain immediate objectives. They lay for a few hours, like boxers before the last round, gathering their ultimate resources of



will and strength and fighting capacity. Some great, decisive battles have been fought at a campaign's beginning, and in history's light there is about them a strange morning freshness, an air of innocence and youthful ardour. Boys in such battles die bravely under the orders of eager but incautious generals. But there are other battles, even more far-reaching in their consequences, which are fought at the latter end of long campaigns, in a wintry, grey, Arthurian dusk, or in some stony pass beneath a torrid, unsparing sun that knows no romance and no illusion. The soldiers in such battles are trained fighters, lean and sinewy men, toughened by many hardships, disappointments and losses; and their commanders have learned their wariness and their skill in harsh schools.

The first battle of El Alamein was of this latter kind, of which it is an attribute that they are not immediately recognized for what they are. Urgent and sombre necessity masks their drama. There is no time to get the heralds and trumpeters, in glittering uniforms, up from the back areas; no time for resounding oratory, for carefully enunciated expositions of the master-plan; no time for showing off, briefing the war correspondents and tuning the propaganda machine up to its appropriate pitch.

The fate of the whole Middle East depended upon this battle. A German conquest of Egypt, Palestine and Syria would have changed entirely the whole course of the war. Its political and its strategic consequences would have been equally far-reaching. But nobody bothered to notice—other than Il Duce, and Rommel had a singularly unflattering opinion of him. Hitler sent no voluble, semi-literate exhortation to victory. Churchill was concentrated on a different sort of battle—in the House of Commons—and sent no telegram either of warning or of encouragement.

The two opposing Commanders-in-Chief, as so often at crucial moments in their war careers, were alone in their hours of decision. Each was a true representative of his nation. But the homogeneity of the German *weltanschauung* was in marked contrast with the diffuseness and subtle variations of the British *ethos*. Rommel was a German in every fibre of his being; so were those staff officers, Bayerlein and von Mellenthin, whose names have recurred so frequently in this narrative. Afrika Korps consisted of Germans in reluctant alliance with a huddle of Italians whom they openly—if unjustly—despised and mistrusted. Auchinleck was not English. He was Scots-Irish, and Dorman-Smith, his principal staff officer, was native Irish; Eighth Army consisted of South Africans, New Zealanders, an Indian division (with whom, according to tradition, British troops were brigaded) and one division, the Northumbrian

50th, of Englishmen. In reserve were the soldiers of nations—the French, the Greeks, the Poles—with contemporary and bitter experience of Germans at their worst. Panzer Army was there for conquest, for expansion—in the ultimate analysis, for loot on an immense scale; the men of Eighth Army, whatever their shortcomings and imperfections as soldiers or as citizens, were there in defence, on guard against the would-be conquerors and destroyers. Such had been the part of the Teuton in many centuries of Western European history, and such had been the part of the Gael.

*Field-Marshal Rommel to Frau Rommel*

30 June 1942

Mersa Matruh fell yesterday, after which the Army moved on until late in the night. We're already sixty miles to the east. Less than a hundred miles to Alexandria!<sup>1</sup>

General Auchinleck, on the morning of 1 July 1942:

These damn British have been taught for too long to be good losers. I've never been a good loser, I am going to win.

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 241.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### The Tide is Turned

*General Auchinleck to All Ranks of Eighth Army* 30 June 1942

The enemy is stretched to the limit and thinks we are a broken army. His tactics against the New Zealanders were poor in the extreme. He hopes to take Egypt by bluff. Show him where he gets off.

*General Auchinleck to Field-Marshal Smuts* 1 July 1942

On the eve of what may prove to be the turning point of our campaign of the Western Desert I wish to tell you how proud I am to be in direct command of 1st South African Division in my capacity as Commander Eighth Army. This magnificent division is holding an important sector of the El Alamein front and I am certain that it will throw back the enemy however often he may come on. I know that I can implicitly rely on Major-General Dan Pienaar and on every man under his command to fight to the last with the courage, tenacity and sagacity which are the characteristics of the S.A. soldier of whom you are the shining example.

*Field-Marshal Smuts to General Auchinleck* 3 July 1942

Deeply appreciate your personal message of July 1 and your confidence in Pienaar and his division. Am glad he has post of honour on Alexandria road. I have full confidence in your leadership and in final result of this battle but it may take some time to wear enemy down for final blow. We are with you heart and soul and shall give you fullest support in every way you wish.

By the time that Smuts sent his reply to Auchinleck's message the first decisive phase of the first battle of El Alamein had been fought and won, and the South Africans had, as Auchinleck predicted, played a notable part in the victory.

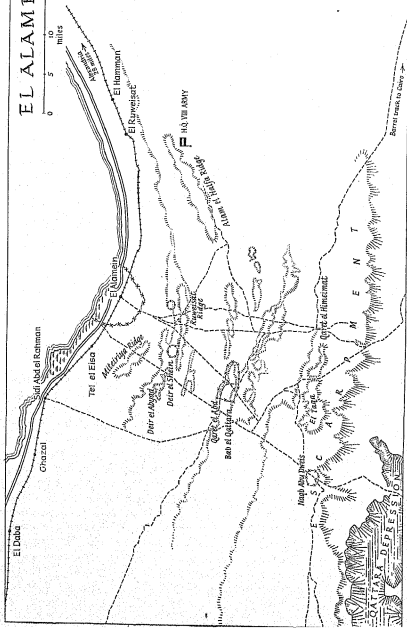
The El Alamein position did not appear, at first sight, to possess any overwhelming merits as the setting for a major defensive battle. There was the little, not particularly prepossessing, group of station

buildings among rolling sand-dunes. The railway ran here some two miles inland from the sea; between the railway track and the coast the sand gave way to brackish marsh. On the last sand-ridge before the marsh there was the road. Southward of the railway the land spread away in almost totally featureless waste, broken only by two low ridges, those of Miteiriya and Ruweisat, to the non-military eye hardly distinguishable from any other part of the Desert. South of Ruweisat the terrain became rougher and rougher; there were escarpments and flat-topped hills, reaching at the southernmost edge a height of seven hundred feet, before the precipices which plunged over towards the Qattara Depression, which was known to be totally non-negotiable by troops or vehicles. Between the Depression and the sea there was, therefore, a 'pass', some fifty miles wide, guarding the approaches to the Nile Delta. Auchinleck recognized its fundamental defensive potentialities when he first arrived in the Middle East in July 1941, and there he ordered the construction of the final defences of the Delta. These consisted of three 'boxes' spaced out evenly across the gap. The most southerly was at Naqb Abu Dweis, where a pass capable of being negotiated by cars led down to a comparatively firm track across the Depression. The northern 'box' was around El Alamein station itself, and midway between it and the Depression there was the third 'box', in a strong position surrounded by escarpments, at the head of a defile called the Bab el Qattara. Each 'box' was some fifteen miles from its neighbour, being intended to be maintained with the support of a strong armoured force. It was thus, as one regimental history at least has vigorously asserted, nonsense—on both sides—to talk about the El Alamein line.

Nevertheless, Rommel did talk about such a 'line' and on the morning of June 30 he formulated his plan for piercing it. He decided that Afrika Korps should make a feint towards the Qattara Depression, but should move on the night of June 30–July 1 to a position about ten miles south-west of El Alamein station. Once more, as before Mersa Matruh, his Intelligence was seriously in error. He thought that 10th Corps (whose remnants were in fact back in the Delta) with 50th Division and 10th Indian Brigade, held the Alamein 'box' and a position south-west of it on the ridge called Deir el Abyad. He believed that 13th Corps, with 1st Armoured Division, the New Zealand and the 5th Indian Divisions, were holding the southern sector between the midway 'box' and the Depression. Labouring under these misapprehensions he therefore ordered Afrika Korps to penetrate between the El Alamein 'box' and Deir el Abyad, and get in behind 13th Corps. 90th Light Division were to

# EL ALAMEIN

0 5 10 15 20  
miles



swing south of the Alamein 'box' and cut the coast road east of it. Tobruk, Mersa Matruh, El Alamein—Rommel believed each time that, if he got in the rear of the British, they would collapse.

Third time unlucky. Von Mellenthin said he thought that this plan offered a real hope of victory. Up against another opponent than Auchinleck it might. But Auchinleck had no intention of doing what Rommel wanted and expected. He was determined that Rommel should conform, in the end, to his wishes. And since his dispositions differed, in several important respects, from those with which Rommel had credited him, he began with one initial advantage—an element, small but real, of surprise.

Afrika Korps, their night march having been delayed by unexpectedly broken ground, discovered, when they began their advance on the morning of July 1, that there was no defensive 'box' on the Deir el Abyad, but that there was one three miles farther east—which was held by the 18th Indian Brigade—on the Deir el Shein.

It might have been possible [von Mellenthin argued] for the Afrika Korps to by-pass the Deir el Shein 'box' and continue its move into the rear of 13th Corps, but in that case another British position—actually held by 1st South African Brigade north of Ruweisat Ridge—would have had to be eliminated.<sup>1</sup>

90th Light meanwhile were confronted by very stiff opposition by the 3rd South African Brigade in the El Alamein 'box', which they tried to by-pass by going south of the station. This merely brought them into rough, sandy going, and their plight deepened when they blundered head-on into heavy fire from the batteries of both 1st and 2nd South African Brigades and 4th Armoured Brigade. The volume of this fire was both heavy and accurate, and it threw 90th Light—quite unaccustomed of late to this kind of handling—into 'confusion not far removed from panic'.<sup>2</sup> There were frantic signals for more artillery, and Rommel, sending his Battle Headquarters to cover the south flank of 90th Light, himself went forward in an armoured car to try to push on the advance. Even he was pinned down;<sup>3</sup> and it was more than ordinarily ironic to note that

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> For two hours Bayerlein and I had to be out in the open. Suddenly, to add to our troubles, a powerful British bomber force came flying towards us. . . . *The Rommel Papers*, p. 246. Here at last Rommel was getting some of his own medicine.

1st South African Division had no idea of the real and lastingly effective trouble which they were causing the enemy.

About noon a sand-storm blew up—in the words of Norrie, commander of 30th Corps, this was 'a real horror of a day . . . with practically no visibility and a hot, depressing khamsin'—which added to the troubles of 90th Light, but aided their opponents.

The converse was true of the experiences of 18th Indian Brigade at Deir el Shein, to the south of 90th Light, where the sand-storm undoubtedly aided the attackers. General Nehring, in command of Afrika Korps, had had an unpleasant shock when he met unexpected opposition in this sector. He spent most of the morning trying to wear it down with an artillery bombardment; then he decided, in the afternoon, that he must eliminate it. He was a cautious, highly professional soldier, and all his instincts and all his training prompted him to this decision. Yet it led to the most crucial action of a most critical time, and for the Axis it was a fatal decision. On the British side it meant the sacrifice of the larger part of 18th Indian Brigade.

The brigade had but newly arrived from Iraq. The two battalions in it which had the hardest fighting—the 2nd/5th Essex Regiment and the 2nd/3rd Gurkha Rifles—had never been in battle before. They had all been digging and mining without pause for three days. Nine Matilda tanks came into the 'box' on the night of June 30–July 1; there were enough guns, but they had not yet been fully dug in and were short of ammunition; small-arms ammunition had not been replenished since the brigade had moved from Iraq.

Yet this inexperienced, ill-equipped formation, for five stern hours under execrable conditions, held the Afrika Korps at bay, and destroyed eighteen tanks out of fifty-five before its position was finally overrun at 19.30 hours. This 'stalwart resistance', as Auchinleck called it in his despatch, not only finally blunted the fighting edge of the Afrika Korps,<sup>1</sup> but gave 1st Armoured Division, after the incessant fighting and journeying of the previous four days, time to reorganize and regroup.

Von Mellenthin in retrospect had no illusions:

Our prospects of victory were hopelessly prejudiced on July 1. Our one chance was to out-manceuvre the enemy, but we had actually been drawn into a battle of attrition. 1st Armoured Division was given an extra day to reorganize, and when the Afrika Corps advanced on July 2 it found the British armour strongly posted on Ruweisat Ridge, and quite capable of beating

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939–45* by Maj.-Gen. F. W. von Mellenthin, p. 128.

off such attacks as we could muster. The South African positions were strong, and 90th Light never had a chance of breaking through them. The Desert Air Force commanded the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

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But as night fell on July 1, neither Commander could so accurately assess the true and final consequences of what had befallen. Rommel was by no means aware of the magnitude of his defeat. Indeed, having been informed by the Luftwaffe that the Royal Navy had abandoned its great base at Alexandria, he believed that his final victory was within sight. At 21.30 hours that evening, still with 90th Light Division (presumably because it was impossible for him to move anywhere else), he ordered this sorely tried formation to continue its attack through to the coast road by moonlight. He was still determined to open the road to Alexandria at this point as quickly as possible, and he was convinced that if he broke through on a wide front he would bring about complete panic. He regarded the day's check as temporary: on the following day, or on July 3 at the latest, he would reap his reward as he entered Alexandria.

Afrika Korps, in spite of their somewhat discouraging day, shared the Field-Marshal's confidence. As Dorman-Smith sat working in Eighth Army's tactical Headquarters that same night, a junior staff officer brought him a transcription of an intercepted radio warning from Afrika Korps, addressed to 'the Ladies of Alexandria', requesting them to make the appropriate arrangements for welcoming the triumphant Axis forces.

'When rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy yourself,' thought Dorman-Smith, whose temperament was as gay and irreverent as his brain was incessantly active. He took the message in to the Commander-in-Chief, who failed to be amused by it.

This was hardly surprising, because for Auchinleck the night was one of serious decisions—in which Dorman-Smith, despite this moment of flippancy, took his share. With Deir el Shein captured—the South African official historians, quoting one of his senior commanders, said that Auchinleck took the loss 'calmly and philosophically'—Eighth Army had on the Ruweisat Ridge, should Rommel decide to attack it, only a thin film of infantry, artillery and armour, organized in battle groups, with less than fifty Grant tanks between them. Some seventeen miles to the east of Ruweisat Ridge, and lying respectively north and south of the Alam Halfa

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 128.



ridge, were Norrie's 30th Corps H.Q. and Eighth Army tactical H.Q. Gott with 13th Corps was far to the south, and communications with him were in their familiar state of semi-chaos. Auchinleck badly wanted to see Gott. He believed that Rommel was trying to mass his forces for a concentrated attack on the El Alamein fortress, and that it was essential to prevent him making it. The best way to do this was immediately to counter-attack. He therefore ordered Gott to wheel northwards, using the defended 'box' at Bab el Qattara as the pivot, and attack the Axis forces on their flank and in their rear. It was essential that Gott should not only receive these orders, but fully understand them. For if he did not, one determined armoured rush at dawn might crush Eighth Army. What neither Auchinleck nor Dorman-Smith fully appreciated at that moment was the full severity of the mauling which Panzer Army as a whole had been given during the previous day.

They were not alone in under-estimating the extent of their own victory. Pienaar, commanding 1st South African Division, rang up Eighth Army H.Q. and spoke to Dorman-Smith. He said that he intended to evacuate the El Alamein defences to avoid being surrounded and forced to capitulate, as Klopper had had to do at Tobruk. Encirclement at this time was a nightmare to the South Africans, and Pienaar can hardly be blamed for giving expression to it. Dorman-Smith ordered him to stand firm. He asked to speak to Auchinleck. The Commander-in-Chief was just as definite as his staff officer had been; he added consolingly—though hardly tactfully—that the leading brigade of the 9th Australian Division would be at El Alamein within the next two days. Pienaar accepted his orders, stayed, and with his division contributed substantially to Eighth Army's defeat of Rommel.

During the same eventful night Eighth Army Headquarters issued to the corps commanders—Gott and Norrie—provisional orders covering a possible withdrawal eastwards, should this prove necessary. It is clear from Gott's conversation with Kippenberger on June 29, referred to on page 624, that Corbett at G.H.Q. had already issued similar provisional orders. Their repetition by Army H.Q. was not only an unavoidable duplication—unavoidable because Auchinleck, though both Commander-in-Chief and Commander of Eighth Army, could not be in two places at once—it had also a deeper, more insidious effect. Both sets of orders were proper and prudent precautions. Their immediate, unforeseen effect in Cairo will be considered in the next chapter; the long-term result of their issue was the growth of the mendacious myth that Auchinleck never meant to fight the first battle of El Alamein to a conclusion.

*Auchinleck's distinct and definite intention was to fight to the last at El Alamein, and should this battle go against him to go on fighting every inch of the way in Egypt. This was his intention from the moment he assumed personal command of Eighth Army; by July 3-4 he had fulfilled the first part of it, and had compelled Rommel to face the facts of failure and defeat. The second part, therefore, never arose.*

\* \* \*

Rommel at last realized that he had Auchinleck against him, not Ritchie. The night advance along the Alexandria road, which he had assigned to 90th Light Division, was forced to a halt, with heavy artillery and machine-gun fire raking the 1,300 men who were by now the division's total strength. It proved, said Rommel, 'completely impossible to make more than a slight advance . . . even though the attack was resumed next day'. He was beginning to learn the bitter lesson of having to conform to the intentions of an abler opponent. From dawn on July 2 the British guns pounded the Axis forces as they struggled to move in the soft sand between El Alamein station and Ruweisat Ridge. Not an inch of ground was conceded, and the artillery fire was concentrated, continuous and intense.

In the afternoon 13th Corps began their northward thrust, using the New Zealand Division and what was left of 5th Indian Division. Rommel's account of this phase of the fighting had a naked candour, more convincing than all the careful analyses by subsequent military historians. The truth of Foch's dictum, often applicable to Eighth Army in the month between May 26 and June 25, now smote Rommel. He wrote:

The 15th Panzer Division was pulled out to parry this attack [by 13th Corps] and its armour was soon involved in violent fighting with the British. The 21st Panzer Division's units were also forced increasingly on to the defensive in the sandy, scrubby country, until by evening the whole of Afrika Korps were locked in violent defensive fighting against a hundred British tanks<sup>1</sup> and about ten batteries. . . . General Auchinleck, who had meanwhile taken over command himself at El Alamein, was handling his forces with very considerable skill and tactically better than Ritchie had done. He seemed to view the situation with decided coolness, for he was not allowing himself to be rushed into

<sup>1</sup> A pardonable exaggeration. Such was the impression of a commander who saw imminent victory being hammered into inevitable defeat.

accepting a 'second best' solution by any moves we made. This was to be particularly evident in the days that followed.<sup>1</sup>

Early on the morning of July 3 the New Zealanders bounced out of their Bab el Qattara 'box' and hit the Italian Ariete Division (which was Rommel's flank guard) with exemplary vigour. This was in fulfilment of a simple but, in the terms of British desert warfare as it had long been waged, markedly original plan which Auchinleck had conceived. He had realized that Rommel had achieved many of his successes, when he was opposed to Ritchie, by using his Italian divisions as a fulcrum and Afrika Korps as a lever. But Rommel had only one lever. Therefore Auchinleck decided to attack wherever it—Afrika Korps—was not. He would go on attacking the Italians and compelling Afrika Korps to come to their rescue until he had eliminated the Italians and exhausted Rommel and the Afrika Korps. Call this an expedient, call it a master-plan (but without all the flummery associated with that overworked noun): its justification was that it worked. The New Zealanders captured every gun Ariete possessed—forty-four in all—and chased them northwards throughout the rest of the day as they fled for shelter under the wing of Afrika Korps. This really was not much help to the poor Italians, for their German allies were now experiencing, for the first time in many, many months, the discomforts of a continuous artillery bombardment by day and a sustained air bombing by night. Afrika Korps, during the morning of July 3, in company with 90th Light and the Italian Littorio Division, had been slogging vainly at the main El Alamein defences. In the afternoon Rommel made his final effort. Under cover of a heavy bombardment the Afrika Korps tried to advance.

Von Mellenthin said:

Some ground was gained on Ruweisat Ridge, but with only twenty-six tanks it was impossible to break through. When darkness fell Rommel ordered the panzer divisions to dig in where they stood; everyone realized that the offensive which opened on May 26, and which achieved such spectacular victories, had at last come to an end.<sup>2</sup>

Rommel said:

After three days vainly assaulting the Alamein line I decided that I would call the offensive off for the moment. . . . Reasons for

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 128.

my decision were the steadily mounting strength of the enemy, the low fighting strength of my own divisions, which amounted by that time to no more than 1,200 to 1,500 men, and above all the terribly strained supply situation. . . . A continuation of the attack would have resulted in nothing more than a useless attrition of our strength. However valuable a breathing-space might be to the British command, we had to give the troops a few days' rest and try to carry out an extensive refit. We intended to return to the attack as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup>

He did, but he never advanced beyond that line which had never been a line.

The biographer of King George VI has written:

The actual turning of the tide in the Second World War may be accurately determined as the first week of July 1942. After Rommel was repulsed at El Alamein on July 2 and turned away in deference to British resistance, the Germans never again mounted a major offensive in North Africa; while in Russia the summer offensive of the Red Army marked the beginning of their ruthless and remorseless progress from the Don to the Elbe.<sup>2</sup>

By what strange and ugly combination of factors were Auchinleck, and the officers and men of the Eighth Army who served under him, not merely deprived of the full credit of this victory, but told to their faces by lesser men that they had not even achieved it, that they had gone down in defeat and retreat, from which miraculously they were retrieved more than a month later?

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 248-9.

<sup>2</sup> *King George VI* by John W. Wheeler-Bennett, pp. 542.

## Intermission behind the Lines

THE answer—or answers—to the question asked at the end of the last chapter can contain no easy comfort. In the words of one of the chief sufferers:

It is not my reputation that is at stake so much as the reputation of the Army for selfless command and sterling truth among its seniors. I know that the operations in January and in May-June 1942 utterly destroyed confidence in the command and that was what Auchinleck had to fight against (far more than against Rommel) when he took over Eighth Army in June 1942. All decent men felt that the whole thing was enmeshed in falsehoods, inefficiency and false personal values.

This is a true bill. Yet grievous as it is, it is not the whole indictment, which must be divided into two main parts. July 1942 was, as has been shown, strategically the real turning point of World War II. But, far from fortuitously, it was also the moral crisis of the war. The military victory obtained three years later, at great cost and sacrifice, was smirched beyond cleansing by the moral degradation and collapse which took place in these weeks, and by the massively false mythology painstakingly created and sustained to disguise that collapse and prevent the truth from being told. The two parts of the indictment concern the course of events in Cairo and in London while Auchinleck was engaged in holding the Middle East and fighting Rommel to a standstill.

These events all occurred within the compass of a few days—June 30 to July 4-5—precisely the period in which Auchinleck was inflicting his signal defeat on Rommel. Their consequences were far-reaching, long-lasting and lamentable.

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Cairo at this time was justifiably described by Churchill as a

'stew-pot'. It seethed and bubbled like some hell-brew, the ingredients of which have got out of the control of the presiding warlock. The intrigues and counter-intrigues of the political factions of Egypt, of the Levant, and of the numerous European governments-in-exile which had established themselves in Cairo, were inextricably mingled with the similar, small-scale intrigues within a huge G.H.Q. and its innumerable ramifications. Luxury, self-indulgence, exhibitionism and corruption all abounded, as they had always abounded in Cairo. From Monday, June 29 onwards there was injected into this habitually poisonous, sickly-sweet and encervating atmosphere a new element—that of fear, which rapidly turned to panic. This episode is derisively known in history as 'the Flap'. It bristled with ludicrous incidents, and seemed utterly preposterous in retrospect. The quality of sheer *opéra bouffe* which is never absent from any Cairene transaction, however brief or trivial, was present in generous measure. But all the jokes,<sup>1</sup> richly funny as they were, could not eradicate the shame and sorrow of the Flap itself, in its origins and in its course.

Placid calm, or what would pass for placid calm in Cairo, had prevailed during all the weeks of disaster after the first Gazala battle, through the fall of Tobruk, through the retreat to Mersa Matruh. After Matruh fell, however, the atmosphere changed rapidly.

Two positive factors can immediately be isolated. Auchinleck, when he went forward, took the completely proper step of retaining in the frontal area only as many troops as it could contain for the purpose of fighting a tactically difficult and complex battle, of whose course he desired to retain, and did retain, complete control. Unwanted troops, broken formations, disorganized supply and service units, were ordered to the rear, there to take their place in the defensive reserve which it was essential to build up. The situation, in essence, was not unlike that which developed in metropolitan France in May-June 1940, with two fundamental qualifications: France in 1940 had no Auchinleck; and morale had been so rapidly and so

<sup>1</sup> There was the story of the officer of one cloak-and-dagger organization who left all his ciphers, three German pistols and several hundred rounds of ammunition in an unlocked suitcase in his hotel bedroom. There was the story of the officer of a different but equally unmanageable organization who marshalled a large party of European nationals—all holding suspiciously new British passports—on to a comfortable sleeping-car train bound for Jerusalem, and at the end of a telephone conversation in which he made the final arrangements for this improbable exodus observed, in a shaking voice, 'Well, good-bye old man, in case we don't get through. . . .' There were countless stories, but—

swiftly dissipated that the Army degenerated into a leaderless, chaotic mob.<sup>1</sup> No such fate befell the British Commonwealth and Allied forces in Egypt in 1942; they were reorganized and regrouped, and though it could not be claimed that they were all equally battleworthy, they would, if called upon, have given some account of themselves.

There were, however, among the thousands of officers and men who were tumbled back into the Delta in those few days, many who were disgruntled and perplexed. There were some whose own weakness had found them out, and who had to mask this unpleasant discovery from themselves. There were many who were bitterly conscious that their own efforts, and the lives of their comrades, had been thrown away by fumbling and incompetent leadership. And finally there was a minority from the higher echelons, whose incompetence as commanders had been nakedly exposed, who were rancorous at the exposure and desperately anxious to cover it up as quickly as they could.

Fear—too many of these men had too recently lived and breathed fear, not merely physical fear, but the moral fear of being found out—is swiftly communicable. Mixed with anger it undermines normally stable social and group loyalties. This temporary break-down of cohesiveness in the somewhat disparate aggregation of individuals which was G.H.Q. was one aspect of the Flap. The Eighth Army had not been beaten, but a great many people persuaded themselves that it had, because they themselves had suddenly known fear and retreat; and they communicated their self-delusion to others. And some of the correspondents, sitting in the hotel lounges and on the terraces gabbling their ill-informed stories, were amongst the most eager and insidious spreaders of rumour.

The second factor which can be isolated is the issue of provisional orders, in case the stand at El Alamein failed, for the withdrawal into and defence of Egypt. The effect of the receipt of these orders on an officer normally as resolute as Gott has been described. In other quarters less exalted, but perhaps a good deal more susceptible to disturbing influences, their effect was even greater. This, after all, had been a year of tragic and shameful retreat—Manila, Singapore, Rangoon; why should not Cairo be the next?

On June 28 officers in Cairo were ordered to carry revolvers wherever they went, and on the following day the centre of the city was put out of bounds to all ranks from 20.00 hours to 07.00 hours. Smuts sent his official aircraft and his personal pilot up from the

<sup>1</sup> For a vivid description of this grisly phenomenon see *The Taxis of the Marne* by Jean Dutourd.

Union to evacuate the family of the British Ambassador.<sup>1</sup> On June 30, G.H.Q. and R.A.F. Headquarters personnel were warned to be at twelve-hour readiness to be evacuated to Palestine; and on July 1 the word went out that all confidential documents were to be burned. The opportunity was taken to get rid of a great deal of superfluous paper, the fires burned merrily for several hours, and the ashes drifted in the hot wind.<sup>2</sup> The native Egyptian population regarded these proceedings—or such of them as they witnessed—with considerable phlegm. Politically, under Nahas Pasha's indubitably corrupt but firm rule, the country was fairly stable; the King, who had earlier been a focus of dislike for the Anglo-Egyptian Alliance and of pro-Axis sentiment, had collapsed into embittered apathy after the Palace *coup* of the previous February. The only flutter of real excitement occurred when a veteran, rascally but agreeable adventurer named Aziz el Masri, who had been an officer in the Ottoman Army before World War I, and had been a leading figure in all extremist Egyptian politics for years, 'escaped' to join the Axis forces in an Egyptian Air Force aircraft, accompanied by two other, much younger, dissident officers. They presented themselves on July 3 at Rommel's Headquarters and were received as 'leaders of the Egyptian Liberation Movement'. They were a little on the late side. It no longer lay in Rommel's power either to help them or to make use of them. This minor diversion apart, internal security in Egypt presented no major problem, and such alarms as it had provoked died down quietly.

The Flap, even at its peak, could have been controlled by the influence of one firm, strong leader. Auchinleck would have had no difficulty in dealing with it, but he was at Eighth Army Tactical Headquarters. The Minister of State, admirable as he was, had only recently taken up his post, and Sir Walter Monckton, who had all the required talents and knowledge, had gone back to the United Kingdom.

In G.H.Q. itself Corbett issued his orders in a sheerly military connotation, with little or no realization of their effect on morale or on policy as a whole. They were not panic orders, but they could be misinterpreted as such by those who themselves were on the verge of panic, for reasons outside Corbett's knowledge or experience. Neither de Guingand, the D.M.I., nor Phillpotts, the D.D.P.R., formerly Auchinleck's A.D.C. and private secretary, and in civilian

<sup>1</sup> Sir Miles Lampson (later Lord Killearn).

<sup>2</sup> Hence the nickname 'Ash Wednesday'. One wag said that the pall of smoke was greater than that over the Dunkirk beaches after the oil reserves had been set on fire.



life a newspaper executive, could give Corbett, in full, the help which he needed.

The Flap ended even more quickly than it had begun. By July 2 those who had been so scared and so excited forty-eight hours earlier had had their equilibrium restored; by the end of the week, Cairo, as the South African official historians put it, 'had returned to the normal routine of its meretricious war-time existence'.<sup>1</sup>

It was not forgotten, however. The correct and prudent provisional orders were confused with the pernicious atmosphere into which they were projected; and ammunition, which they would not hesitate to use, had been put into the hands of Auchinleck's enemies. For this the unfortunate Corbett, who had no desire but to serve his country and its cause, whose affection for and loyalty to his Commander-in-Chief were boundless, bore a considerable share of the responsibility. He had been chucked into, and he floundered in, the stew-pot; but by whose wish was he there at all? Auchinleck's. It would have been much better for them both had he remained a corps commander in Iraq.

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In London, Churchill was back in the saddle by the week-end of June 27-29. Once he had sized it up, he was in no doubt as to the nature of the crisis, from his point of view. There was an internal political challenge, derived from and superimposed upon an external military crisis. This was a danger whose magnitude he could fully apprehend. His memory was long and tenacious. He could cite apt precedents—not merely the obvious, recent one of May 1940, but the Gallipoli crisis in World War I which had seen his own ejection from high Ministerial office, and the later, even more significant crisis of December 1916 which had resulted in the overthrow of Asquith and his replacement by Lloyd George.

These precedents could hardly be regarded as consoling. Political feeling in Parliament and the Press had changed greatly since the splendid days of 1940. The criticisms, were they effectively pressed against Churchill in his capacity as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, might split the Cabinet, and destroy that broad, hitherto firm basis of political unity on which the continuance of his direction of the war as a whole had always depended. In defence of that unity he could not afford to be over-scrupulous. Walking the razor-edge between eclipse and survival, he must slay or be slain. He believed himself to be most vulnerable on the conduct of the campaign in the

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 284.

Western Desert—not, as he saw it, for any fault of his own, but by reason of Auchinleck's mistakes and failures. This conviction was by no means new. On June 10 he had said to General Kennedy, in the middle of a long discussion of Eighth Army's difficulties: 'I don't know what we can do for that army. All our efforts to help them seem to be in vain. . . . Nothing seems to help them. And I am the one who gets his neck wrung when things go awry.'<sup>1</sup>

Since then his vulnerability had greatly increased. Tobruk had fallen; there had not been a final stand at Mersa Matruh; and by June 29–30 'it was widely believed' (in his own words) 'that Cairo and Alexandria would soon fall to Rommel's flaming sword. . . . It seemed that we should reach a climax on the Parliamentary and Desert fronts at the same moment.'<sup>2</sup>

The supercharged political and emotional atmosphere in which Churchill lived in these days must be understood, as well as the constant and grave strain under which he laboured.

Nevertheless, in the darkness which brooded over the Egyptian scene the Prime Minister perceived a small flicker of light. However small and shaky the confidence he retained in Auchinleck, the fact that the Commander-in-Chief had—even if tardily—taken personal command of Eighth Army might offer some degree of hope and reassurance. When, robustly refusing an offer by Wardlaw-Milne to withdraw his motion<sup>3</sup> as untimely in view of the crisis in the Desert, he fixed the date of the debate for Wednesday, July 1, he knew that there was one announcement which he would have to make.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

29 June 1942

When I speak in the Vote of Censure debate on Thursday, about 4 p.m., I deem it necessary to announce that you have taken the command in supersession of Ritchie as from June 25.

To Auchinleck, fighting for the life of Eighth Army and his whole huge Command, a vote of censure in the House of Commons seemed singularly remote and unimportant. But Churchill was fighting for life too. The pity was that later he used both the bludgeon and the rapier on the man who rescued him in the nick of time. This was not simply churlish ingratitude—for Churchill was by no means an ungrateful man—but arose from a complex of causes: political expediency, imperfect military education and understanding, distrust of generals and acute dislike of India and the Indian Army. At

<sup>1</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 353.

<sup>3</sup> See above, p. 603.

the moment, however, all these factors were subordinated to the pressing need for survival.

Since Churchill believed himself to be most vulnerable on the reverses in the Western Desert, it was for him a natural and necessary tactic to turn, so far as he could, this weakness into a strength. The timing of the debate was such that he could not speak in terms (or indeed with any realization) of the decisive victory which was being won while the discussion took its course. All that he was conscious of was defeat and withdrawal, with the likelihood of further, larger disasters to come. He decided—as was his right—to hear the debate through and reply to it at the end.

When he entered the House on July 1 his face was white and set. There was no hint of chubbiness. The lines around his mouth were grim. The House was full and demurely excited. Churchill later gave his own copious and candid account of the course of the debate. It was perhaps fortunate for him that the mover, Sir John Wardlaw-Milne, and the seconder, Sir Roger Keyes, had not consulted one another, and gave the impression of attacking the Government for precisely opposite reasons: Wardlaw-Milne wanted Churchill's power to be heavily curbed, Keyes wanted him to have more authority and a wider sphere of responsibility. The debate was, therefore, as Churchill pointed out, 'ruptured from the start'.<sup>1</sup>

There were some effective speeches, and some not so effective. Aneurin Bevan made his suggestion that a Czech, a Pole, a Frenchman, or a former member of the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War would command the British and Commonwealth forces in the Middle East better than Ritchie or Auchinleck. Leslie Hore-Belisha dealt learnedly and forcefully with the question of tank production. But the most telling intervention was that of Lord Winterton, who was the Father of the House.

Churchill quoted amply from the speech in his memoirs, but Lord Winterton's account was of more interest, because it analysed and clarified the intention behind the attack:

The gist of my remarks was that if there were a series of disasters such as we had undergone, the Prime Minister must be held constitutionally responsible. If they continued he should resign his post as Prime Minister, and take office, preferably as Foreign Secretary, under some other member of the Government.<sup>2</sup>

Lord Winterton, convinced that he was emphasizing an essential and fundamental principle of democracy, commented:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 357.

<sup>2</sup> *Orders of the Day* by the Earl Winterton, p. 285.

No statesman who has taken so tremendous and momentous a part in the affairs of his country as Mr. Churchill has done for half a century can escape the aftermath of his previous mistakes and misfortunes. The fact that this participation has, in the main, been of unique and immeasurable benefit to the country does not alter this fact.<sup>1</sup>

He gave an impressive list of some of Churchill's more sensational failures: Antwerp, the Dardanelles (for which Winterton, who had fought in the campaign, did not blame Churchill), the abortive attempt to overthrow the Bolsheviks in 1919, and in World War II a number of defeats, as grievous as any in our history. 'By every rule of our well-established though unwritten constitution he had to accept responsibility to the House of Commons for them.'

Winterton went on to consider Churchill's relationship to the armed forces of the Crown. 'Was his control of the fighting strategy too close, too personal and too military in a general sense? Could he or should he have interfered less in it?' Admitting his inability satisfactorily to answer these questions, Winterton—not in his speech but in his considered assessment of it years afterwards—made some observations which were both penetrating and revealing.

He praised Churchill's visits to the various Fronts, but pointed out that they would have been better had they been made in civilian clothes.

His appearance, on occasion, in uniform with ribbons, to both of which he was most honourably entitled, gave the impression that he was a Generalissimo and not a Prime Minister; further, it suggested that he was more directly responsible for strategy and tactics than either was the fact or ought to have been. This donning of uniform was not popular with the House of Commons when they heard of it. That body has a long memory and has neither forgiven nor forgotten Cromwell, or his threats to substitute military rule for its own.<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental propositions of this narrative, proved by his own subsequent account of his work as Prime Minister and by all the documents which later became available, are that Churchill behaved as a Generalissimo rather than a Prime Minister, that he was indeed more directly responsible for strategy and tactics than he ought to have been, and that, while his political leadership was of

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 285.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 287.

immeasurable value, his military interference and interventions diminished the authority of commanders in the field and tended to inhibit, rather than assist, the war effort.

The debate lasted for two days—on the first until nearly three in the morning. As the House at last adjourned—Who goes home? Who goes home?—the full sun of morning flooded the battlefield two thousand miles to the east, and Auchinleck's guns pounded Rommel's battered panzers and weary infantry as they struggled in the dunes between El Alamein station and Ruweisat Ridge. Churchill had been able to listen to no more than half the speeches. 'I had of course,' he said, 'to be shaping my rejoinder for the next day; but my thoughts were centred on the battle which seemed to hang in the balance in Egypt.'<sup>1</sup>

He need not have worried. The battle was no longer in the balance. The tide of the war had turned. He could have slept undisturbed that summer night.

\* \* \*

During July 2 Churchill sent Brooke a copy of his speech. On Kennedy's suggestion the C.I.G.S. offered the following comment:

In fairness to Auchinleck, and in order to obviate any further allegation that your statement is not complete, it is suggested that a sentence be included, to the following effect: 'When the possibility arose of having to withdraw from the Gazala positions, I and the C.I.G.S. expressed to General Auchinleck a strong hope that Tobruk would be held, but no order to this effect was ever sent from London.'<sup>2</sup>

Having consulted the Ministers who had read all the telegrams, Churchill did not see fit to include this observation. In his account of the debate in his book he gave copious extracts from his speech. After a few, brief preliminaries he came straight to the Western Desert, culminating (as he saw it) in the fall of Tobruk. Since his critics had assailed him on these matters, he had to paint an even darker picture than any of theirs. The phrase 'would-be profiteers of disaster' was masterly; but, after all, he was only taking their profit from them and using it himself:

The military misfortunes of the last fortnight in Cyrenaica and Egypt have completely transformed the situation, not only in that

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 358.

<sup>2</sup> *The Business of War* by Maj.-Gen. Sir John Kennedy, p. 245.

theatre, but throughout the Mediterranean. We have lost upwards of fifty thousand men, by far the larger proportion of whom are prisoners, a great mass of material, and, in spite of carefully organized demolitions, large quantities of stores have fallen into the enemy's hands. Rommel has advanced nearly four hundred miles through the desert, and is now approaching the fertile Delta of the Nile. The evil effects of these events, in Turkey, in Spain, in France, and in French North Africa, cannot yet be measured. We are at this moment in the presence of a recession of our hopes and prospects in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean unequalled since the fall of France. If there are any would-be profiteers of disaster who feel able to paint the picture in darker colours they are certainly at liberty to do so.

A painful feature of this melancholy scene was its suddenness. The fall of Tobruk, with its garrison of about 25,000 men, in a single day was utterly unexpected. Not only was it unexpected by the House and the public at large, but by the War Cabinet, by the Chiefs of Staff, and by the General Staff of the Army. It was also unexpected by General Auchinleck and the High Command in the Middle East. On the night before its capture we received a telegram from General Auchinleck that he had allotted what he believed to be an adequate garrison, that the defences were in good order, and that ninety days' supplies were available for the troops. It was hoped that we could hold the very strong frontier positions which had been built up by the Germans and improved by ourselves, from Sollum to Halfaya Pass, from Capuzzo to Fort Maddalena. From this position our newly built railroad ran backwards at right angles, and we were no longer forced to a flank—as the expression goes—with our backs to the sea, as we had been in the earlier stages of the new Libyan battle. General Auchinleck expected to maintain these positions until the powerful reinforcements which were approaching, and have in part arrived, enabled him to make a much stronger bid to seize the initiative for a counter-offensive. The decision to hold Tobruk and the dispositions made for that purpose were taken by General Auchinleck, but I should like to say that we, the War Cabinet, and our professional advisers thoroughly agreed with General Auchinleck beforehand, and although in tactical matters the Commander-in-Chief in any war theatre is supreme and his decision is final we consider that if he was wrong we were wrong too.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The last sentence of this paragraph is omitted from Churchill's version (op. cit. Vol IV, p. 361).

It was clear that Winterton had touched upon a vital spot. In answer to this challenge Churchill gave a lucid, impeccable exposition of his idea of the proper relationship between a Government and its commanders in the field:

I willingly accept, indeed I am bound to accept, what the noble Lord has called the 'constitutional responsibility' for everything that has happened, and I consider that I discharged that responsibility by not interfering with the technical handling of armies in contact with the enemy. But before the battle began I urged General Auchinleck to take the command himself, because I was sure nothing was going to happen in the vast area of the Middle East in the next month or two comparable in importance to the fighting of this battle in the Western Desert, and I thought he was the man to handle that business. He gave me various good reasons for not doing so, and General Ritchie fought the battle. As I told the House on Tuesday, General Auchinleck on June 25 superseded General Ritchie and assumed command himself. We at once approved his decision, but I must frankly confess that the matter was not one on which we could form any final judgment, so far as the superseded officer is concerned. I cannot pretend to form a judgment upon what has happened in this battle. I like commanders on land and sea and in the air to feel that between them and all forms of public criticism the Government stands like a strong bulkhead. They ought to have a fair chance, and more than one chance. Men may make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. Men may have bad luck, and their luck may change. But anyhow you will not get generals to run risks unless they feel they have behind them a strong Government. They will not run risks unless they feel that they need not look over their shoulders or worry about what is happening at home, unless they feel they can concentrate their gaze upon the enemy. And you will not, I may add, get a Government to run risks unless they feel that they have got behind them a loyal, solid majority. Look at the things we are being asked to do now, and imagine the kind of attack which would be made on us if we tried to do them and failed. In war time if you desire service you must give loyalty. . . .

This was a magnificent statement of principle. It is only necessary to add that, in practice, the Prime Minister diverged a good deal from a course of conduct which he knew to be right and which (without doubt) he believed himself to be pursuing unswervingly. Therein lay the root of many difficulties and many troubles. It did

not appear to Churchill that there was any inconsistency between this passage and a later one in which he dealt trenchantly with the substance of the motion on the Order Paper:

There is an agitation in the Press, which has found its echo in a number of hostile speeches, to deprive me of the function which I exercise in the general conduct and supervision of the war. I do not propose to argue this today at any length, because it was much discussed in a recent debate. Under the present arrangements the three Chiefs of Staff, sitting almost continuously together, carry on the war from day to day, assisted not only by the machinery of the great departments which serve them, but by the Combined General Staff, in making their decisions effective through the Navy, Army, and Air Forces over which they exercise direct operational control. I supervise their activities, whether as Prime Minister or Minister of Defence. I work myself under the supervision and control of the War Cabinet, to whom all important matters are referred, and whom I have to carry with me in all major decisions. Nearly all my work has been done in writing, and a complete record exists of all the directions I have given, the inquiries I have made, and the telegrams I have drafted. I shall be perfectly content to be judged by them.

Supervision? Control? How far did these diminish that freedom from interference in the tactical handling of armies in contact with the enemy, to which Churchill had referred earlier? How far was that freedom from interference consistent with the 'precise, up-to-date and superseding advice' which, as Churchill stated, he and his colleagues gave to the Commander-in-Chief; or with the definite orders, issued on May 10, that Malta should not be allowed to fall without a battle being fought by the whole of Auchinleck's army for its retention? These orders, Churchill himself said, Auchinleck had to obey or be relieved. To issue these orders was indeed 'a most unusual procedure on our part towards a high military commander'.<sup>1</sup> For the Prime Minister to tell the House of Commons less than eight weeks later that he had discharged his constitutional responsibility by not interfering with the tactical handling of armies in contact with the enemy was an even more unusual procedure.

The immediate consequence was that the motion of No Confidence was defeated by 475 votes to 25. The long-term consequences were a good deal less agreeable.

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<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 497.



*Secretary of State for India to General Auchinleck* 2 July 1942

All our thoughts are with you today and in complete trust in your handling of things whatever may happen. Myself, I am still prepared to hear any moment that you have fought Rommel to a standstill and that you can then push him back as far and as fast as supplies make that possible. But even if you are pushed back still farther and have to wage the war in Egypt itself I am sure that you will come out on top somehow.

Anyhow this is just to tell you what I feel today. When it reaches you you may be engaged in a still sterner struggle—or have emerged victorious. This requires no answer—I quite agree with Wellington on that point.

One politician at least was as chivalrous as he was staunch.

\* \* \*

On the morning of July 3 the New Zealand Division swept out of the Bab el Qattara 'box', put the Ariete Division to rout and captured all their guns. Churchill awoke a few hours later to receive American congratulations, not on this audacious and successful counter-offensive, but on the result of the previous night's division in the House of Commons.

*President Roosevelt to Prime Minister* 2 July 1942  
Good for you.

*Mr. Harry Hopkins to Prime Minister* 2 July 1942

Action of Commons today delighted me. These have been some of the bad days. No doubt there will be others. They who run for cover with every reverse, the timid and faint of heart, will have no part in winning the war. Your strength, tenacity, and everlasting courage will see Britain through, and the President, you know, does not quit. I know you are of good heart, for your military defeats and ours and our certain victories to come will be shared together. More power to you.

*Prime Minister to Mr. Harry Hopkins* 3 July 1942

Thank you so much, my friend. I knew you and the President would be glad of this domestic victory. I hope one day I shall have something more solid to report.

Important as the domestic, political victory was, it mattered a

great deal less than what was happening in the Western Desert. But of this, as yet, neither Churchill nor his American friends had any inkling. By the evening of July 3, Rommel had decided to call off his offensive against El Alamein 'for the moment'. This was the victory which mattered. Had Auchinleck not won it, had there been, that week-end, the fighting in the Delta, the 'defence to the death of every fortified area or building' to which—in part of his being, at least—Churchill looked forward with grim eagerness, his majority in the House of Commons on Thursday evening would have meant less than nothing on the following Monday. Aneurin Bevan, among whose many gifts divination was not included, had indeed hinted as much. 'Remember my words next Monday and Tuesday,' he said. 'It is events which are criticizing the Government.'

Events, in truth, were helping the Government; but those events were now, at last, under the control, not of any of Bevan's exciting nominees, but of a Scots-Irish general whom he curtly described as 'inefficient', in command of an army which, in his opinion, was 'ridden by class prejudice'. With all their faults, Auchinleck and Eighth Army had, by that Thursday evening, held Egypt and held the Middle East. It had been, however, for them as for Churchill and the Government, 'a damned nice thing—the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life'.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

On the evening of July 3, as the exhausted men of Panzer Army thankfully obeyed Rommel's order to dig in where they were—and under the guns of Eighth Army it was a pretty comfortless position—Churchill, in his room in the House of Commons, told Brendan Bracken, his close friend and most loyal supporter, who was then Minister of Information, that he proposed to fly out to the Middle East with the C.I.G.S. Bracken, considerably perturbed, walked out of Churchill's room and encountered Brooke waiting to see the Prime Minister. He begged the C.I.G.S. to use his influence with Churchill to prevent his going.<sup>2</sup>

Brooke needed no persuading, for he dreaded the impact of the Prime Minister's presence in the middle of a battle.

Had about three-quarters of an hour with Winston . . . [he

<sup>1</sup> The Duke of Wellington after the Battle of Waterloo.

<sup>2</sup> This incident is recorded in *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 419. Lord Bracken, in a conversation shortly before his death, confirmed it completely.

recorded that night] trying to convince him that he should not try to fly out to Gib. and through the Mediterranean in a Liberator, and secondly, that he should wait till situation consolidates a little more in Egypt before flying out.<sup>1</sup>

One of the main criticisms levelled against Churchill's war-time leadership was that he held obstinately to his own views and intentions in face of the advice and experience of others. Examples of this trait in the Prime Minister's character have not been absent from this narrative. On this occasion, though reluctantly, he took the advice he was given; and on this occasion his intuition was right, and the advice of others, though well-intentioned, was wrong. Bracken was thinking of the physical health and the political jeopardy of his beloved chief; Brooke was prompted by his soldierly instincts and training, and by his dread—founded on painful personal experience—of the havoc which the Prime Minister might wreak when he reached Cairo.

Yet had Churchill, as he was perfectly capable of doing, persisted, ordered his aircraft and set off with Brooke—instead of postponing the journey for a month—many melancholy consequences might have been averted. They would both have seen for themselves, at the time, what was happening both in Cairo and in the Desert. Brooke would have grasped at once the military implications of Rommel's defeat; the Prime Minister would have no time to brood over the wound inflicted on him by the fall of Tobruk, and his anger and suspicion would have been swallowed up in the recognition of hard-earned victory. Nor would there have been time for those who had been beaten by Rommel to recoup their self-esteem by unloading the blame on to better, broader shoulders than their own.

But Bracken and Brooke, for the best of motives, persuaded Churchill to accept their arguments. He remained in London another month.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### Rommel Admits Defeat

VON MELLENTHIN, that highly professional staff officer, said of Panzer Army's position on the night of 3 July 1942: 'We had just failed.'<sup>1</sup> In London, Churchill had it firmly fixed in his head that within a day or two, however valorous the fight that might temporarily be put up at El Alamein, the battle would be raging in the Delta. On the morning of July 3, heartened by the eclipse of Wardlaw-Milne and Keyes, he drafted a telegram:

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*3 July 1942*

On July 1 we told you our special information that enemy after feinting at your southern flank would attack centre of your position about where 18th Brigade lay and thereafter turn northwards to cut off El Alamein strong point. This is exactly what he appears to be trying to do. Are you getting these priceless messages (which have never erred) in good time? Every such telegram ought to be in your hands without a moment's delay.

2. How is the 8th Armoured Division getting on and when can it come wholly or partly into action? What is state and position of 9th Australian Division? Have they got all their guns?

3. Should be glad to have your opinion at leisure about how Rommel's tanks would get on among canals and irrigation of Delta.

4. Germans are enquiring whether inundations have been made. This was all planned two years ago with Wavell. Presume it has been carried out. Whole idea is that Egypt should be defended just as drastically as if it were Kent or Sussex without regard to any other consideration than destruction of the enemy.

5. Everyone here greatly heartened by your splendid fight. Overwhelming vote House of Commons confidence in Government and your army.

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 128.

*General Corbett to Prime Minister*

3 July 1942

Am answering for Commander-in-Chief to avoid delay. Your message being passed to him with this reply.

1. Every special-source message goes direct Eighth Army and received there as early as at G.H.Q. These messages of great value. Some arrive in time to be operationally of use, others not so. Timings can be checked your end.

2. 8th Armoured Division: Two squadrons Valentines already gone forward to reinforce Eighth Army manned by personnel 1st Army Tank Brigade. Personnel of this division start landing July 4. Dependent on physical condition of men possible to move forward one armoured brigade group complete about middle July. Not yet possible to forecast readiness of second brigade owing to necessity replacement tanks already sent Eighth Army and provision artillery support. 9th Australian Division less one brigade group arrived in Alexandria defences from which one battle group moving today to join Eighth Army. This battle group composed of twenty-four 25-pounders with proportionate escort anti-tank and infantry. Third brigade group completes arrival Alexandria area July 4. Steps taken to put whole division on mobile basis. Divisional artillery has seventy-two 25-pounders and fifty-five anti-tank guns of which fifteen are six-pounders.

3. Tank movement among waterways and irrigation channels much restricted. No reason to suppose Rommel could do any more with his tanks in this area than ourselves. Large number tank-hunting commandos formed from schools and depots for operations in enclosed Delta area.

4. Alexandria area: Complete inundations not possible yet as essential to retain use of aerodrome which would be affected. Remaining inundations now being put into effect. Cairo area: Partial inundation carried out. Completion of scheme still under negotiation with Egyptian Government. Water in west branch of Nile which is normally fordable in many places at this time of year being increased. Arrangements have been made to defend the Delta with every available man and all resources.

Corbett was one of those most severely criticized and most severely punished in the subsequent belated and unseemly purge. This telegram should stand on record in vindication of his efficiency as a soldier—whatever his shortcomings in the matter of high-level policy and public relations—of his stoutness of heart and of his offensive spirit.

By the morning of July 4 the situation of Panzer Army was, said

von Mellenthin, who did not use words lightly, 'perilous'. The Afrika Korps had thirty-six tanks in running order and a few hundred infantry in the last stages of exhaustion. The artillery were very strong, for they had a great many British guns taken during their headlong advance, but their own German guns had almost run out of ammunition. Then they found some 1,500 rounds of twenty-five-pounder ammunition in Deir el Shein, and the Italians had some reserve stocks.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

4 July 1942

I cannot help liking very much the way things seem to be going. If fortune turns I am sure you will press your advantage, as you say, 'relentlessly'.

The Prime Minister at this phase of the battle resembled, to the irreverent eye of the historian, nobody so much as some loud-mouthed follower of a football team who, having poured advice, objurgations, jeers and insults on his team while they were being hard pressed, now, when they show their calibre, shouts at them, 'Shoot! Put it in! Give it to 'em! Sock 'em!'

There is no indication that Corbett's courteous but salutary hint about the special-source messages on which Churchill set so much value—'Some arrive in time to be operationally of use, others not so'—was taken. But it is certain that Auchinleck, in command of the battle itself, was thinking and acting much more clearly and much more quickly than Churchill, and that the Prime Minister's exhortations, advice and rebukes (there were plenty of all three throughout July) no longer mattered very much, and tended to be late and irrelevant.

\* \* \*

At the moment when Rommel was telling O.K.W., on the night of July 3-4, that he had temporarily to halt his victorious sweep into Egypt, and Churchill was being dissuaded from flying out as fast as he could to Cairo, Auchinleck was issuing orders to Eighth Army whose intention was to deliver such a blow at Panzer Army as would end the Western Desert campaign. This was to be the final reckoning.

The South African Official History commented:

The attempt to reverse the whole trend of the past five weeks by a single blow showed both initiative and daring, and future

historians will have to decide how far the failure was inherent in the plan itself, how far due to lack of elasticity in the morale of the Eighth Army, and how far to inadequacies in British staff and tactical training.<sup>1</sup>

The plan was simple: 30th Corps were to hold the assault of Panzer Army (if Panzer Army had any stuffing left in them), and 13th Corps were to work round the Axis flank and strike northwards at their communications.

Eighth Army moved slowly. Von Mellenthin went to the heart of the matter: Auchinleck, he said, 'could not stir his corps commanders into action. . . . We survived July 4 with no real damage except to our nerves.' The whole day was confused and inconclusive, and passed with little activity. There was an obscure episode in the afternoon, involving 22nd Armoured Brigade and a German lorried infantry regiment which the Afrika Korps war diary described as having been 'overrun'. Auchinleck in a signal to the C.I.G.S. that evening said: 'An infantry advance . . . came to nothing and at one time seemed about to develop into a surrender, but this seems to have been a ruse and no prisoners fell into our hands.' But Dorman-Smith's diary on the same evening contained the jotting: 'First batch of Germans surrender,' noted much as a naturalist would have recorded the first primrose as a sign of approaching spring. It is at least clear, however, that a vigorous turning movement from the south by 13th Corps, which was what Auchinleck had ordered, combined with some pressure by 30th Corps westwards from El Alamein, would have broken the Axis forces completely.

The South African Official History said: 'One of the great opportunities of the war had been missed.' The blame for this lost chance must lie with Gott and Norrie, both of whom were too tired to be able to adjust their minds to a radically changed situation and to an Army commander with his own fresh and original ideas about beating Rommel.

July 5 repeated the story of July 4. On the night of the 4th-5th Auchinleck issued a formal order:

Our task remains to destroy the enemy as far east as possible and not to let him get away as a force in being. This can best be achieved by containing the enemy's eastern front and southern flank and attacking his rear. It is important that the enemy should

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 316.

be given no rest. . . . Eighth Army will attack and destroy the enemy in his present position.

And he signalled to the C.I.G.S.:

Propose to continue to press round enemy south-west flank and rear with aim of forcing him back on El Alamein position and coast.

However, neither corps achieved very much on July 5. Von Mellenthin, writing thirteen years afterwards, attained a remarkable degree of professional impartiality when he observed: 'The inactivity of the British on July 5 is particularly reprehensible.' 13th Corps, it was true, suffered an unexpected reverse when 4th New Zealand Brigade was caught by German dive-bombers south of the Bab el Qattara 'box' and suffered severe casualties. The brigadier, the brigade major and twenty-two others were killed, and thirty-eight wounded. But no other formation in the corps either attacked or was attacked; and on 30th Corps front there was a similar ominous lack of action. 1st Armoured Division were on the Ruweisat Ridge, with ninety-nine tanks, supported by the 24th Australian Brigade (just arrived from Syria), and by three columns from the 50th and 10th Indian Divisions. Facing them 15th Panzer Division had fifteen tanks, two companies of infantry and guns down to two rounds each. That night the Germans began laying mine-fields. If Rommel's hopes of renewing his eastward thrust had been shattered by Auchinleck, Auchinleck's hopes of crushing Rommel by a swift and audacious counter-assault had been thwarted by the inability of his corps commanders to seize the initiative which lay in their grasp and, indeed, to implement the clear instructions which they had been given. It was not without significance that on July 6 Norrie was relieved by Ramsden, the commander of 50th Division.

Meanwhile, on July 6, Rommel went on regrouping his forces and strengthening his defensive front. The fact that it was defensive, sixty miles from Alexandria, underlines the irony of all warfare, and of desert warfare in particular. But he got another six tanks up from the repair shops, bringing Afrika Korps's grand total up to forty-four, and he began to build up a mobile reserve. 'It was still possible for Auchinleck to defeat us,' von Mellenthin observed, 'but every day increased his difficulties.'

Circumstances, which neither of the two opposing Commanders could entirely dominate, were compelling them both into static warfare. Yet each was a master of mobility, and each went on striving in



these first two weeks of July to recapture mobility. It is inaccurate and unjust to depict Auchinleck as a defensive general or to regard this phase of the campaign, on his part, as sheer digging-in to hold 'the El Alamein line' and to defend Egypt; it is even more inaccurate and unjust to distort his oft-repeated intention of keeping Eighth Army in being into a desire to retreat and an implicit unwillingness to hold Egypt to the last, like Kent or Sussex, as the Prime Minister urged. Auchinleck was determined to keep Eighth Army in being to attack and to destroy the Axis forces in the Western Desert. He was just as eager to assume the offensive as Rommel was.

These considerations are fundamental in any appraisal of the operations of July 1942. They have had to be stated with emphasis because July became the month that was ignored by the historians and the writers of memoirs.

However, before they were finally gripped in the war of attrition, both Auchinleck and Rommel made their last attempts to recapture the initiative. And Smuts, far away in Pretoria, was watching the battle with a close attention rivalling that of Churchill. Was it only a week earlier that he had ordered his personal aircraft up to Cairo to rescue Lampson's family? On July 6 he signalled General Theron, his senior liaison officer in Cairo:

Please convey to C.-in-C. my immense relief that enemy has been stopped at El Alamein which I trust may become one of the decisive turns in this war. His courage and unflinching tenacity is at last having its reward and thus justifies our full and implicit confidence in his leadership in what threatened to be overwhelming misfortune. I feel proud that 1st South African Division and S.A.A.F. have played their part in this crisis and justified his faith in them. We shall continue to give our fullest support until not only Tobruk is avenged but Africa is cleared of enemy.

*General Auchinleck to Field-Marshal Smuts*

7 July 1942

Very many thanks for your telegram which I greatly appreciate. The battle is NOT over yet but we are holding him and hope to get him. Your men are doing splendidly. Your assurances of continued support most welcome.

July 7 was, in the words of Eighth Army's situation report, 'a very quiet day, little activity either side'. On the night of July 7-8, 24th Australian Brigade staged a raid against 15th Panzer Division on Ruweisat Ridge. 30th Corps reported next morning that they had destroyed five guns, four gun-tractors and two large troop-carriers,

and recaptured a Bren carrier. The Australians claimed to have inflicted fifty casualties of which fifteen were killed, and to have taken nine prisoners, for the loss of one missing believed killed, and six slightly wounded. To the Germans this was not a small night raid but a formal attack with tanks, in which the situation was only restored by throwing in the general reserve. At 07.45 hours Rommel himself came to the ridge, took a serious view of what had happened, ordered further extensive mine-laying, and sent a seasoned and especially redoubtable officer to take command of the remains of 15th Panzer.

The South African Official History's comment was just:

If a small raid was capable of causing such turmoil the observer is inclined to wonder what could have been effected with a blow delivered with the full force of the fresh and uninhibited Australian Brigade.<sup>1</sup>

On the same night on the 13th Corps's front Gott, under instructions from Auchinleck, withdrew New Zealand Division from the Bab el Qattara 'box', a movement covered by columns from 7th Armoured and 5th Indian Divisions. It took the Axis forces completely by surprise. In the course of July 8, 15th Panzer made a couple of languidly puzzled reports, but it was not until the morning of July 9 that Rommel learned that the 'box' had been evacuated more than twenty-four hours earlier. He was very angry and ordered its immediate occupation. Heavy forces were brought up against what was in fact only a thin rearguard screen, and Rommel himself was in the 'box' early on the afternoon of July 9. He was puzzled but elated by Auchinleck's manoeuvre; in his elation he made a profoundly wrong appreciation. He summoned the commander of 21st Panzer Division, General von Bismarck, and they concluded that this was the beginning of a general retreat by Eighth Army. Afrika Korps would resume their eastward thrust. Soon they would be in the Delta—ten days after the date which Rommel had predicted, but nevertheless the conquerors of Egypt. The Littorio Division took over the 'box', orders were issued for an advance by the panzer divisions on the following day, and Rommel had his bed made up in a bomb-proof shelter.

He slept until 05.00 hours and was then awakened, as he recorded, 'by the dull thunder of artillery fire from the north'. It was heavy and continuous. Men in the Afrika Korps who had served in World

<sup>1</sup> *Crisis in the Desert* by J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L. C. F. Turner, p. 325.

War I said that it was even stronger than any gunfire they had experienced on the Western Front a quarter of a century before. Rommel said: 'I at once had an inkling that it boded no good.'

The South African official historians ended their volume, *Crisis in the Desert*, with these heartening (and truthful) words:

He was right. Auchinleck had changed over finally to the offensive, and the Eighth Army was never again to know the anguish and humiliations of retreat.

\* \* \*

Auchinleck had effected this revolution in the whole military situation, tactical and strategic, in exactly a fortnight. For this achievement he was never to receive the recognition which it deserved. But he was not merely content to have saved Egypt: he now proceeded to pummel the Axis forces into insensibility.

On the night of July 9, with 21st Panzer leaguered just north of the Bab el Qattara box, 15th Panzer, Ariete and Trieste on the Ruweisat Ridge, the Axis forward defensive positions were held by four Italian infantry divisions, in a curved line running northwards from 21st Panzer's left flank to the sea. They were the Brescia, Pavia, Trento and Sabratha Divisions. Sabratha were in the northernmost positions, across the road and the railway, and facing the eastern edge of the El Alamein 'box'.

The artillery bombardment in the small hours of July 10 was the prelude to a relentless forward thrust against the Sabratha Division by those formidable infantrymen, the 9th Australian Division. About three miles in rear of Sabratha's positions, and immediately south of the railway line, was a series of sandy mounds, called Tel el Eisa. This was the objective of Auchinleck's attack. On the west, only a couple of miles to the north-east was the Headquarters of Panzer Army, with von Mellenthin, the Ia, in temporary command of it, because Rommel was far to the south at Bab el Qattara.

Von Mellenthin was considerably startled, early on the morning of July 10, to see hundreds of Italians rushing past the Headquarters 'in the final stages of panic and rout'. He was no chairborne warrior. He wrote many years later:

When a headquarters is threatened the first instinct is to move, and safeguard its irreplaceable equipment and documents. It was clear to me, however, that Sabratha was finished—their artillery

was already 'in the bag'—and something must be done immediately to close the road to the west. I called on the staff and personnel of Headquarters to form a rough battle line, which I strengthened with our anti-aircraft guns and some infantry reinforcements which happened to arrive; we succeeded in holding the Australians, who had captured the mounds of Tel el Eisa, and were seeking to thrust up the coast road.<sup>1</sup>

Rommel hastily gave up any idea of an eastward drive from Bab el Qattara; the orders were cancelled; and he himself, with his Battle Headquarters and what he called 'a combat group' from 15th Panzer Division, hurried north. From the west there arrived the German Infantry Regiment 382, part of the first substantial reinforcements which Rommel had been sent from Europe. Without them, von Mellenthin thought, the northern flank of Panzer Army would have been broken through. While they held dourly on to the line—only some three thousand yards from Panzer Army's main Headquarters—which von Mellenthin had established, Rommel attempted to cut off the Australian salient on Tel el Eisa from the south, but the guns of El Alamein pinned him down.

He was being made to conform to Auchinleck's intentions. Of this, the most successful part of Auchinleck's whole period of command in the Middle East, there is practically no record in his own papers. German writers—Rommel himself, Bayerlein and von Mellenthin—dealt with it extensively. They had a clear if rueful conception, both at the time and subsequently, of what was happening to them. Rommel's comment was that during these days the British Command 'showed considerable enterprise and audacity'.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of the capture of Tel el Eisa were laconically recorded in Auchinleck's despatch:

We destroyed a number of German and Italian tanks, captured fifteen guns and took over a thousand prisoners, nearly all Italians. I had hoped to be able to exploit this success to the west and south, but the enemy offered strong resistance and I had no reserves available with which to reinforce the attack.

The Tel el Eisa salient was an important acquisition, since it threatened the enemy positions farther south. Fully conscious of this, the enemy transferred German infantry from the centre of his line to stiffen the Italians on the shoulder of the salient and

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 254.

made heavy and repeated counter-attacks against our new positions. Some posts changed hands more than once, but the Australians held fast to all the principal tactical features. We thus retained a firm base from which to attack southwards against the enemy's centre or westwards along the coast.

On July 11 the Australians renewed their attacks south of the coastal road. Their chief victims this time were the Italian Trieste Division, whose losses—in killed, wounded and captured—were heavy. 'The most significant feature of the new battle,' said von Mellenthin, 'was that the Italian troops were no longer able to hold their positions.'<sup>1</sup> It took the concentrated fire of all Panzer Army's guns to stop the Australians' advance.

Auchinleck's major anxiety now was that Rommel might see the red light and bolt. On the night after the collapse of the Trieste Division there was a spate of reports at Eighth Army Headquarters that there were streams of traffic, with headlights on, moving westward from the Axis positions. Dorman-Smith hastily prepared provisional orders to corps commanders for a pursuit. But whatever the origin of these reports, Rommel was in fact as determined to hold on as Auchinleck was to throw him out of the Western Desert.

During July 12 he ordered the 21st Panzer Division up to the northern sector, and ordered for the following day a direct attack, supported by infantry, on the El Alamein 'box'. If he had overrun the 'box'—as, until lately, he had overrun so many 'boxes'—it would indeed have been, as von Mellenthin thought, a real victory: it would have cut the Australians off at Tel el Eisa, and might even have opened the way to the Delta, which took on for the Germans, throughout this month, the appearance more and more of a bitterly delusive mirage. It lay there, beyond the desert dust and barren waste, green, gleaming and for ever inaccessible. 21st Panzer were bidden to cut off the El Alamein fortress area from the east 'in a lightning advance', and then to break into it. Their assault was to be supported by every gun and every aircraft the Axis forces could muster.

The attack began at noon on July 13. The Stukas screamed down in their menacing dives. The guns roared. But, as Rommel admitted, 'the attack miscarried'. The infantry allotted to it deployed some three thousand yards too far to the rear; the immediate effects of the air and ground bombardment were not nearly as overpowering as Rommel had hoped; and his attacking troops—armour as well as

<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 131.

infantry—were halted by artillery and machine-gun fire before they had even penetrated the perimeter wire. The dive-bombers came in again and the German tanks blazed away with every available gun at the concrete defences of the 'box'. The Axis Intelligence was again at fault; they thought the 'box' was being held by the 9th Australian Division, and Rommel referred to the defenders as such in his memoirs. However, the credit for 'this important defensive success'<sup>1</sup> belonged in fact to the 3rd South African Brigade, and its effect on Rommel was considerable:

In the evening I decided to break off the action. I was in an extremely bad humour, for a heavy sand-storm had been blowing all day. . . .<sup>2</sup>

*Field-Marshal Rommel to Frau Rommel*

14 July 1942

My expectations for yesterday's attack were bitterly disappointed. It achieved no success whatever. However, the blow must be borne, and we're going forward with fresh courage to new operations.

Once again the responsibility for the attack was given to 21st Panzer. They were shifted westward and ordered to direct their thrust at the Australian positions at Tel el Eisa, and break through to the sea. Late on the evening of July 14, with the setting sun at their backs and under cover of heavy Stuka bombing, they launched their assault.

But again the attacking infantry moved too late so that the paralysing effects of the bombing were lost. Nevertheless we reached the coastal railway and might have done more if it had not been for a galling flanking fire from the El Alamein 'box'. Fighting continued until long after dark and the Australian infantry showed that they were the same redoubtable opponents we had met in the first siege of Tobruk.<sup>3</sup>

Rommel fully intended to renew his attack on July 15. But his intention was frustrated once more, because Auchinleck moved more quickly than he did.

In order to improve our position against a possible enemy

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45* by Maj.-Gen. F. W. von Mellenthin, p. 132.

offensive and to set the stage for a further attack on our own part, the Eighth Army maintained its pressure along the whole front.<sup>1</sup>

Just before midnight on July 14-15 the New Zealand Division and the 5th Indian Brigade launched an offensive along the Ruweisat Ridge and south of it. By dawn the infantry had broken the resistance of the Italian Brescia Division and were in command of the ridge. The New Zealanders were then attacked in the rear by 15th Panzer Division, which had come back into action after many days. They called for help from 1st Armoured Division; Brigadier Kippenberger himself drove through the heat of the battle to make the request to General Lumsden. The armour moved slowly, and their delay was accounted for by an unexpected mine-field. When they did arrive they drove off 15th Panzer without much difficulty, but failed to exploit the advantage. Lumsden himself was wounded and had to be taken off the battlefield. To the New Zealanders the day was a dreadful one of 'uncertainty and helplessness'. The Germans put in a second counter-attack late in the evening with 21st Panzer and badly mauled the 4th New Zealand Brigade. Kippenberger described the whole day's fighting as 'a bitterly disappointing battle'. Yet his division alone took 1,600 prisoners—and early in the morning one New Zealand officer asserted that there were twenty thousand for the taking—twelve eighty-eight-millimetre guns, forty-three other field guns, sixty anti-tank guns and mortars, and automatic weapons 'beyond counting'. There was also, according to Kippenberger's own evidence, 'a very large number of dead, more dead Italians than on any other battlefield that I have ever seen, and many Germans, as the German gunners mostly fought to the death.'<sup>2</sup> Rommel said that the bulk of two Italian divisions, Brescia and Pavia, had fallen into British hands.

What was the cause of the disappointment? It was certainly felt by many others besides Kippenberger—not least by Auchinleck himself, who observed in his despatch merely that the 'tactical position in this important part of the front was improved by this operation'.

The plan was sound. The initial phase of the battle was (in Kippenberger's words) 'a truly brilliant victory, honestly earned by the eighteen rifle companies who made the assault'. But this victory was not exploited as it should have been. Kippenberger went on:

The fundamental fault was the failure to co-ordinate infantry and armour. That is impossible without a common doctrine, a

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 174.

sound system of inter-communication, and training together. The attitude of the armour commanders at that period was not helpful, but I do not think that we of the infantry did nearly as much as we could or should have done to ensure that we fought the battle together.<sup>1</sup>

It was difficult to decide whether this fierce battle of St. Swithin's Day was a victory or a defeat. Rommel, however, continued to attach great importance to this sector of the front. On the following morning 21st Panzer tried to attack the New Zealanders' flank but were effectively stopped by 2nd Armoured Brigade. In the afternoon 15th Panzer made an even more determined effort to drive 5th Indian Brigade off the ridge.

Throughout the afternoon of July 16 Stuka attacks and enemy artillery fire gradually increased. At 18.05 hours, as the level sun struck the eyes of the defenders, movement began in the Deir el Shein depression to the west and north-west of the Indian positions. (The attack had been expected on the opposite side of the exposed salient.) Twenty-five minutes later clouds of dust broke over a low ridge less than two thousand yards from 5th Brigade's forward lines. As the panzers streamed into sight they were engaged by British armour from a hull-down position and by the six-pounders which had been dug-in flush with the northern rim of the ridge. A furious engagement followed over the heads of the infantry who received little harm in their sangars and slit trenches. As dark fell, light tanks and armoured cars skirmished out to meet in individual engagements. A remarkable pyrotechnic display ensued. Streams of interlacing tracer marked the clashes, the flat trajectory of the Breda guns easily distinguishable from the bouncing golden balls of the British fire. For three hours the armour battle continued, heavily supported on both sides by artillery. At 21.00 hours the enemy broke off the fighting and withdrew.

Daylight revealed the extent of the victory. Eight hundred yards from the Indian positions the first victims sprawled. Behind them the ground was strewn with wrecks as far back as the lip of the Deir el Shein depression. A careful scrutiny revealed some dubious derelicts; Brigadier Russell called for searching fire, whereat a number of panzers which had been shamming dead scurried away. Throughout the day detachments from 4th Field

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 173-4.



Company dealt with the wrecks. The demolition list that evening proved the enemy to have mounted a full-scale attack with all arms in close support and to have sustained substantial losses. Twenty-four tanks including a recaptured Stuart tank had been blown up. Six armoured cars were scrap metal. The most imposing list covered self-propelled guns. One storm gun, five twenty-millimetre light anti-aircraft guns, five thirty-seven-millimetre anti-tank guns, eight seventy-five-millimetre field guns, and six eighty-eight-millimetre guns had been abandoned on the battlefield. For these kills the six-pounders were largely responsible. In a day these venomous little cannon became the pride of the Eighth Army.<sup>1</sup>

While 15th Panzer were suffering this costly repulse on Ruweisat Ridge, the Australians a few miles to the north-west were on the offensive again. They overwhelmed the remnants of the unhappy Sabratha Division, but were checked by the German Infantry Regiment 382 and by heavy artillery fire. At 05.00 hours on July 17 Australian infantry, supported by a squadron of British tanks, drove southwards at the Miteiriya Ridge, pierced the front of the Trieste and Trento Divisions, and once again were only brought to a halt by German units rushed up from the central sector. The Luftwaffe joined in during the afternoon, and the Australians suffered considerable casualties.

July 17 was as difficult and unpleasant a day as Auchinleck ever gave Rommel. 'Every last German reserve had to be thrown in to beat off the British attacks. . . ' Rommel wrote. 'We were going to count ourselves lucky if we managed to go on holding our line at all.'<sup>2</sup>

At about 16.00 hours Kesselring and Cavallero arrived at the Headquarters of Panzer Army. There was an unseemly squabble about supplies and reinforcements; from Rommel's account, it is quite clear that nerves and tempers on the Axis side were badly frayed.

*Field-Marshal Rommel to Frau Rommel*

17 July 1942

Things are going downright badly for me at the moment, at any rate in the military sense. The enemy is using his superiority, especially in infantry, to destroy the Italian formations one by one, and the German formations are much too weak to stand alone. It's enough to make one weep.

\* \* \*

<sup>1</sup> *History of the 4th Indian Division.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 257.

During this period, which Auchinleck spent entirely in the field, in hour-by-hour tactical control of Eighth Army's operations, he could not divest himself of his strategic responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief. He was no less conscious of them than he was of each successive stroke and counter-stroke in the slogging-match in which he was engaged against Rommel:

Although we had arrested the German advance on the Delta and had begun to lay the foundations for a further offensive, developments on the Northern Front made it necessary to consider afresh the general strategy of the Middle East. In order to fight in Cyrenaica at all, we had to concentrate all our armoured forces and practically the whole of our air forces on that front. The losses suffered by the Eighth Army in June compelled me to withdraw most of the remaining troops from our Northern Front. The Ninth and Tenth Armies had thus been denuded of troops and transport, and were not even in a position to impose any serious delay on the enemy should he attack. The final outcome of the battle of El Alamein was still in the balance, and it seemed very doubtful whether we should be able to spare troops from the west to reinforce the north.

The necessity might very well arise in the near future. For, while the battles for Egypt were in progress, the German armies had been advancing swiftly in southern Russia. By the middle of July the German vanguards had reached the foothills of the Caucasus, and it seemed that only the fact of Stalingrad holding out and threatening their flank would prevent them from pushing into Persia.

Very shortly we might have to take a decision whether to continue to concentrate all our efforts on defending Egypt from the west or to divert the greater part of our resources to protect the Persian oil-fields against attack from the north. It was obvious that with the resources available, we could not do both simultaneously. The Middle East Defence Committee, therefore, represented the situation to the Defence Committee in London and asked for guidance.<sup>1</sup>

This request for guidance was embodied in a telegram sent from Cairo on July 8. The Middle East Defence Committee calculated that if the German offensive in Russia continued as it had begun, there would be a threat to northern Persia by October 15; if O.K.W.

<sup>1</sup> Auchinleck, Despatch, p. 21.

switched their main thrust and attacked through Anatolia, the threat would develop against Syria and Iraq about September 10. The telegram concluded:

In our view the issues before us are extremely grave. If the campaign in Russia goes badly for the Russians and you find it impossible to send us necessary reinforcements in time, we shall be faced with a situation in which it will be necessary to decide:

(a) Whether our forces and as much of our base installations as possible should be deliberately transferred from Egypt to the Northern Front to secure the Persian oil-fields with the consequential loss of Egypt, or

(b) Whether we should continue our present policy and risk the loss of the Persian oil-fields.

We have not got the forces to do both, and if we try to do both we may fail to achieve either. We request your guidance and instructions on this issue.

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

*12 July 1942*

We are only too well aware that the Japanese threat to India and our defeats in the Western Desert have stripped the Northern Fronts bare. You also no doubt realize that it is practically impossible to send six or even four additional divisions from home or from the United States to the northern theatre before the end of October. The only way in which a sufficient army can be gathered in the northern theatre is by your defeating or destroying General Rommel and driving him at least to a safe distance. If this were accomplished before the middle of September, the Australian and New Zealand Divisions could return to their stations in Palestine and Syria and the 41st Division could be sent to the northern theatre direct. We will send the 56th Division in the August convoy and are preparing yet another division for the east. One British division might perhaps have to be withdrawn from India, if the Russian southern flank showed signs of breaking.

It must be recognized, however, that if you do not succeed in defeating and destroying Rommel, then there is no possibility whatever of making a sufficient transference to the north, and we shall continue to be entirely dependent on the Russian Front holding.

There is no need to assume that the Russian Front will break or that, if it does, any substantial forces could operate in Persia as early as October. Indeed the General Staff's picture was that the advent of winter might prevent any serious threat before the

spring of 1943 and even then it would be in terms of a maximum of seven divisions. The Germans would be running serious risks in advancing south-east while the main mass of the Russian armies is undefeated on their front and on the flank of their advancing spearhead.<sup>1</sup>

*General Auchinleck to Prime Minister*

15 July 1942

I quite understand the situation and will, as I think you know, do my utmost to defeat the enemy in the west or drive him back sufficiently far to lessen the threat to Egypt. My aim is to destroy him as far east as possible. Even if driven back, substantial forces must remain in the Western Desert or Cyrenaica to watch the enemy and, if this happens, it would be unwise to look for large reinforcements from the west for the north. In any event the time taken to transfer troops from Egypt to Persia must be considerable. I know you are aware of these factors and I mention them only to make it clear that I understand the implications of your telegram, which appear to me to be that, unless we can destroy the German forces here and so be enabled to transfer troops to Persia, we stand to lose Iraq and the oil, should the Russian Front break. Whether this is a justifiable risk is not within my competence to say, but I understand that you have accepted it and that, therefore, I am to continue to apply all my available resources to destroying the German forces opposing me as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the fires of wrath which had been lit by the fall of Tobruk continued to smoulder. Auchinleck, as was his responsibility and his right, had requested Maitland Wilson to conduct an enquiry into the whole episode. While this investigation was proceeding a remarkably maladroit telegram was despatched from London to Cairo.

*V.C.I.G.S. to General Corbett*

6 July 1942

The fall of Tobruk after such a very short resistance involving the capture of so many prisoners and the loss of so much material seems from this distance quite inexplicable. Axis reports state that the general surrendered and in any case it is evident that the

<sup>1</sup> From *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 420, it is clear that this telegram was an 'unpleasant wire' which Churchill drafted and Ismay tried to dissuade him from sending. When Brooke was brought into the discussion, Churchill agreed to alter the wire and send half of it to Auchinleck and half to Corbett. This is the half he sent to Auchinleck.

greatest capital can be made by enemy from the whole incident which has caused considerable criticism in this country of the fighting spirit of our commanders.

Cabinet wish deputy adjutant-general to enquire and report as soon as possible on the circumstances in which the capitulation took place and in particular on the conduct of the general in command.

Corbett sent a copy of this signal to the Commander-in-Chief, who saw it on July 7. His reaction was swift and uncompromising.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

8 July 1942

I can NOT believe that Cabinet has ordered *my* D.A.G. to report independently on an operation carried out under *my* command and I shall be grateful for an early explanation of this request which seems to be extraordinary. If the Cabinet intend to send out a Committee of Enquiry from home well and good, but to depute a staff officer of mine without my sanction is not tolerable and I am sure was NOT intended. I would greatly appreciate direct instructions from you on matters of such personal importance. As Corbett has told V.C.I.G.S., I have already instituted an enquiry into the fall of Tobruk under Wilson who is a very competent judge. I do not propose to take any other action.

Six days passed before there was any answer to this proper and moderately worded protest.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

14 July 1942

My telegram of July 6 accurately represents decision of Cabinet, but there was no intention of any independent enquiry being held by one of your staff officers. Procedure proposed represented a very genuine desire not to bother you with details of a post-mortem when you have so many other anxieties and responsibilities. I think your own solution of appointing Wilson whose judgment can be so well relied upon meets the case far better. We had the best of intentions. Am very sorry for misunderstanding.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

14 July 1942

Many thanks your telegram of July 14 and for motives prompting original wire. Sorry for misunderstanding.

Far away in Pretoria Smuts kept his watchful eye on the course

of the battle. This long-distance view was not always as accurate as that of the man on the spot.

*Field-Marshal Smuts to General Auchinleck*

15 July 1942

Looking at actions last and this week it appears enemy is trying to repeat his successful Gazala tactics, attacking in two places well apart to secure points for further advance and confuse us as to where to reinforce most strongly. While holding northern attack we have lost Qarat el Himeimat in extreme south. This taken in conjunction with strong position enemy is creating in locality 877275 seems to indicate his intention to create another Bir Hacheim situation and move by southern flank. This should be prevented before too late.

*General Auchinleck to Field-Marshal Smuts*

16 July 1942

Am most grateful for your advice which I always prize. We are fighting this battle on quite different lines from Gazala and for last ten days enemy has been conforming to our moves and not we to his. Himeimat means nothing to me at present. There is no Bir Hacheim here. El Alamein is a bastion on which our flank rests. I am not saying we have won battle but enemy is not making us dance to his tune.

Have just heard that our mobile troops have re-occupied Himeimat from which enemy withdrew.

\* \* \*

By his telegram to Auchinleck on July 12 the Prime Minister had asserted once again his strategic control, not only of the war as a whole, but of one sector of it—the Middle East theatre—and had given the Commander-in-Chief a clear directive. But implicit in the maintenance of strategic control was—as Churchill himself had assured the House of Commons with emphatic solemnity in that section of his speech in the censure debate which dealt with Lord Winterton's criticisms—responsibility for the consequences. Auchinleck's task was clearly defined for him: in order to build up a sufficient force with which to hold his Northern Front, he must defeat or destroy Rommel or 'drive him at least to a safe distance'.

Eighth Army, battered as it was, had to be launched at once into a fresh series of unpredictable offensive operations. The War Cabinet could offer Auchinleck no aid; the order was theirs, but would they assume any responsibility if it proved impossible to carry out the order successfully? In essence this was 'Battleaxe' all over again:

a commander in the field was being pressed to attack but denied the means with which to make that attack effective.

Auchinleck turned and faced this task without demur or complaint. Dorman-Smith wrote:

Our problem was simply this: how could we open a breach in the Axis front and hold it open to allow our mobile troops to drive deep into Rommel's supply lines or to encircle his less mobile divisions? For Rommel had by July 17 redistributed Afrika Korps so that any part of his front we attacked could be quickly counter-attacked by German infantry and tanks; it was necessary, therefore, to draw off the counter-attack elements from the area chosen for the decisive break-through. Moreover, the Germans were reinforcing Afrika Korps, and repaired tanks were fast coming to hand; also the enemy were rapidly strengthening their defensive positions and laying large quantities of mines. The sooner we could attack the better; delay would only increase our difficulties.

The operations of July 21 to July 25-26—Auchinleck's final offensive, the last battle, indeed, in any theatre of war in which he was ever to exercise operational command—can only be understood in the light of this sense of urgency, and of the grave deficiencies in equipment, manpower, training and leadership which his instructions from the Prime Minister compelled him to disregard. In his effort to comply with those instructions he planned a two-pronged attack; but it was of the essence of this plan that the two prongs should be thrust home not simultaneously but in succession, to ensure that when the second thrust was made, the largest possible number of Panzer Army's tanks should be still embroiled in the difficulties created by the first attack. An added complication was that the two attacks should be so located as to be close enough together to force Rommel to draw off his counter-attack forces to deal with the first assault, but far enough apart to create a time-lag in which it would be difficult for him to get them back to deal with the second assault.

This second assault was intended to be the decisive break-through. All concentration for it must be carefully concealed. The first attack would have succeeded if it bisected the Axis defensive front; but it was a tricky problem in logistics to withdraw from Eighth Army's lightly-held southern sector (without the Axis Intelligence getting to know of it) the armoured-car brigade and mechanized infantry needed for the second assault. The troops were few and the time was short. The longest possible time-lag, as

Auchinleck saw it, was forty-eight hours. If the first attack were to be made on July 21-22—the earliest possible date—the second assault must go in on July 23-24. Everything hinged on the mobility, battleworthiness and tactical leadership of Auchinleck's armour.

The armour at his disposal when the plan was first mooted consisted of a single, under-strength brigade of Grants, which (in the terminology of the sea so often applied to desert warfare) were Eighth Army's only remaining capital ships. It would be necessary—unless the first assault led to a real Axis rout—to use them in both attacks. And here, said Dorman-Smith long afterwards, 'the devil who makes a special study of projected battles intervened triumphantly'. The 23rd Armoured Brigade had just arrived in Egypt from the United Kingdom, equipped with the obsolescent, slow-moving Valentine 'I' tank, whose armament consisted of one two-pounder gun. By the standards then current in the United Kingdom the officers and men of this formation were well trained; Auchinleck had been repeatedly rebuked by Churchill for failing to 'throw into the battle' troops freshly arrived in the Middle East and for insisting that they should be given a period of training under desert conditions.

The battle-devil pointed out that there were many resemblances between the situations for which the brigade had been trained in England and those now prevailing in the Western Desert: the front had been stabilized, the tanks and the infantry could operate on the same axis, and there was an impressive volume of artillery support. Moreover, he whispered, the infantry available were tough and experienced in battle, and the attack was to be launched against the Italians. 'There,' he said, 'is attack number one provided for; you haven't had anything so luxurious for weeks.'

All ranks of the 23rd Armoured Brigade, from the commander downwards, were eager to be in the fray, and confident of their ability to take part in it at once.

Oblivious [wrote Dorman-Smith] to the chuckles of the battle-devil, we handed over this enthusiastic outfit to Gott, and told him to be ready to release the first attack on July 21-22, with the object of cutting Rommel's battle front in two parts.

This was the first of the two successive thrusts. If it had succeeded, Auchinleck would have directly severed Rommel's communications, and would then have been able to roll up the northern part of his army. 'With this end in view,' he said in his despatch, 'I told General Gott to attack the enemy positions about Deir el Abyad and



El Mreir.<sup>1</sup> His plan, said Liddell Hart, 'was ably conceived in its broad design'.<sup>2</sup>

Full comprehension of it, however, did not filter down to the lower echelons. Gott held no corps conference to plan the assault arrangements in detail, and the different formations were left unenlightened about the parts allotted to their neighbours. An essential part of the plan was that the Grants of 22nd Armoured Brigade should give swift and strong support to the initial infantry thrust; it was invalidated by the fact that the commander of this formation refused to move his tanks at night. Kippenberger, whose brigade was one of those committed to the infantry assault, had an acrimonious but fruitless discussion with this officer on July 21, returned to his Headquarters, and dictated a brief *aide-mémoire* to his brigade major: 'The Brigadier has returned from the division conference and says there will be another bloody disaster.'<sup>3</sup>

Auchinleck wrote:

Just before dusk on July 21 the 161st Indian Infantry Brigade and the 5th and 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigades advanced along the Ruweisat Ridge and to the south of it with the object of opening a way for our armoured forces to break through. The attack was preceded and supported by very heavy artillery fire and aerial bombardment. At the same time supporting and diversionary attacks were made on either flank. In the north the 9th Australian Division attacked . . . with the object of improving their positions and of exploiting to the south, while the 1st South African Division was directed on Miteiriya. At the same time the 69th Infantry Brigade, temporarily attached to the 7th Armoured Division, attacked enemy positions . . . in the south.<sup>4</sup>

The initial attack in the centre made rapid headway, and the New Zealanders reached the El Mreir depression before day-break, after several hours of hard fighting. The British Grants, which were supposed to support them, had not arrived by daybreak. 15th Panzer counter-attacked fiercely and inflicted heavy losses on the 6th New Zealand Brigade.

Then up came the gallant, inexperienced and ill-equipped 23rd Armoured Brigade. At about 08.00 hours they thundered past the New Zealanders' northern flank at a great pace in their Valentines.

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tanks* by Capt. B. H. Liddell Hart, Vol. II, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> *Infantry Brigadier* by Maj.-Gen. Sir Howard Kippenberger, p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> Despatch, p. 58.

They came under terrific anti-tank fire, ran on to a mine-field, and were overwhelmed by a counter-attack made by 21st Panzer Division.

The much better equipped 22nd Armoured Brigade spent the morning (said Kippenberger bitterly) 'sitting about in our forward area and out in no-man's-land beyond. They had several tanks hit and after a while realized they were doing no good and departed.'<sup>1</sup> A battalion of the 161st Indian Brigade succeeded in breaking into the Deir el Shein 'box', but were wiped out in a counter-attack.

By nightfall on the 22nd this first thrust of the two-pronged assault had gained some valuable ground, but it had failed in its object of breaking through the Axis defence positions and splitting Rommel's army in half.

Four verdicts on it are worth recording:

Auchinleck's own:

The failure of this operation was largely due to the lack of reserves with which to maintain its momentum, and this was a constant limiting factor throughout the El Alamein battle.<sup>2</sup>

Rommel's:

Our defence had scored an undoubted success.<sup>3</sup>

Von Mellenthin's:

A complete disaster for the British; owing to a complete lack of co-ordination and control they lost well over a hundred tanks and 1,400 prisoners. . . . Although our losses were heavy, particularly among the German infantry, the battle of July 22 was very favourable to us and encouraged the hope that we could hang on at El Alamein.<sup>4</sup>

Kippenberger's:

Two infantry and two armoured brigades had been deployed. They had made three unrelated attacks from different directions at different times. A single small panzer division of some twenty or thirty tanks and a fifth-rate infantry division easily dealt with all three attacks in succession and inflicted crippling losses.<sup>5</sup>

Rommel's terse comment apart, the true explanation of the failure of July 22 lay in a combination of all the causes adduced by Auchinleck, von Mellenthin and Kippenberger. It had perhaps been

<sup>1</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 258.

<sup>3</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> Despatch, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> *Panzer Battles 1939-45*, p. 134.

tempting the gods a little too boldly to give the operation the code-name 'Splendour'.

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On the morning after this serious, but not catastrophic, disappointment, a letter reached Auchinleck from Brooke, written in London only six days earlier.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

17 July 1942

You have constantly been in my thoughts since Rommel started his attacks, and I have so well realized the difficult and anxious times that you have been through. I only wish that it was possible to do more to help you from this distance.

It is such a joy to see you gradually regaining the mastery over the enemy. I do hope that this heavier equipment in the shape of six-pdr tanks, and the latest American tanks, will arrive soon enough to provide the additional striking power you require. Neil Ritchie has just arrived. I had a long talk with him yesterday and am having another long one tonight. . . .

I did not answer your very kind wire<sup>1</sup> more fully as I had seen the Prime Minister's wire to you expressing full confidence in you. It is his confidence that is the important factor. You know how temperamental he is apt to be at times, so I hope you do not attach too much importance if occasionally his telegrams are not quite as friendly as they might be. I can assure you that I do all that is within my power to guard you against unnecessary repercussions from outside, and to let you carry on with the least possible interference. But even with the best will in the world, results often fall short of what I should wish! I should however like you to realize how much I feel for you in the difficult times you have been through, and to know that you can rely on me to do all I can to help you from this end.

I have now got your organization for your Northern Front and am getting it pushed through. It seems a little top-heavy at present with the reduced forces that are in Syria, Iraq and Persia, but it provides a sound basis to build on if we can find forces for you. That is the main difficulty at present! Archie Wavell at a pinch can spare two divisions, and we are preparing to send two more after the 51st Division. This might assist in delaying the initial German penetration into Persia if Russia cracks, but will not go far. The whole matter is one of time and space. If we could

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 608-9, *General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*, 23 June 1942.

succeed in checking the Germans in northern Persia during the winter, there might be an opportunity of building up some force before the spring, but even this would be dependent on diverting shipping from all other proposed enterprises of Americans and ourselves! We are at present hard at it working out all the various alternatives and should soon be able to let you have some sort of plan to meet a crack on the Russian Front. But as you say with our limited resources both in forces and in shipping we are compelled to gamble whether we like it or not!

You are quite right and we must not rely on weather and terrain exercising an undue delaying effect on the enemy. I have just returned the latest J.I.C.<sup>1</sup> estimate to them on that account. Their estimate of rate of German advance through Caucasus and through Persia is far too optimistic as to the slow rate of advance. . . .

Our visit to America was useful in many ways, and at any rate secured additional equipment for you. . . .

I have every hope of being able to escape to pay you a visit before long, and am preparing plans. Shall let you know results as soon as I can fix something definite. Am looking forward to it tremendously.

With *very* best of luck to you in your trying and difficult task.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

25 July 1942

Thank you very much indeed for your letter of July 17 which reached me very quickly.

I would like you to know how greatly I appreciate what you said in it and, still more, the way in which you said it! Your confidence and encouragement mean very much to me.

We have succeeded, though only just I am afraid, in regaining some measure of local initiative, and I think that it was due to our first effort in this direction, the threatening of his southern flank, which stopped the enemy continuing with his designs to attack El Alamein from the south-west.

Our subsequent efforts in the north against Tel el Eisa and the Ruweisat Ridge in the centre kept the ball rolling and made the Germans move their troops about to stiffen the Italians.

We also inflicted considerable loss on the Italian part of his army in these operations. I was disappointed when our big effort of July 21-22 came to nothing, as I had great hopes of it. I still do not know the full story of the battle in the centre, but it does

<sup>1</sup> Joint Intelligence Committee.

seem as if the 23rd Armoured Brigade, though gallant enough, lost control and missed direction. The infantry, too, seem to have made some avoidable mistakes. Perhaps I asked too much of them, but one can only plan on the information available. Well, there it is; we undoubtedly gave the enemy a rude shock, judging from the many intercepted messages from various enemy units, but we failed to get our object, which was to break through. The Australians had some success in the north and gained more depth to their position west of El Alamein. In the south the efforts of the 7th Armoured Division were most disappointing, especially as they had been reinforced by the 69th Infantry Brigade. The grain of the country is against them and the enemy is strongly posted, though he can not be strong in numbers, I feel.

We are going on trying to find a way round or through in the south, but I am not too hopeful about it at the moment.

The enemy has now got his German infantry, irrespective of what formation or unit they belong to, sandwiched in between the remnants of his Italian divisions along the whole front, so that we can no longer fall on Italians and put them in the bag as easily as we did at first. However, we are watching for a weak spot and will, I hope, find one soon. I feel that owing to the great length of front he is holding the enemy can not have much depth to his position, except in the centre, where he holds his German armour in reserve. His Italian armour is behind his southern sector. The trouble is that I have really no reserve with which to stage new attacks or to keep up the momentum of an attack once started. . . .

The Eighth Army will need a commander of its own again some day, I suppose, though I propose to stay here until the present battle ends one way or another. I think I must see it through and I certainly want to, though it is not too easy filling a dual role. However, Corbett is doing excellently in Cairo, and I deal only with the biggest points of policy, though there are quite a lot of these, as you can imagine.

I believe Gott might command Eighth Army well, and so far as I can see he shows no signs of weariness and is learning how to handle big formations every day. He has, however, been a long time in the Desert and he might go to Ninth Army in Syria, that is if you consider he is ripe for an Army command. He impresses me most favourably in every way.

I think that when Wilson has finished these enquiries he might go, though he is admirable in his handling of his problems in Syria and has shown no recent signs of tiredness. We should then want a commander for Eighth Army from home or India. He must be a

man of vigour and personality and have a most flexible and receptive mind. He must also be young, at any rate in mind and body, and be prepared to take advice and learn unless he has had previous Western Desert experience. . . .

I have decided to relieve Whiteley as B.G.S. Eighth Army by de Guingand. He badly needs a complete change and I hope you will be able to find him a niche in the planning organization for which he is eminently suitable. I do not think he is cut out for high staff appointments in a field formation, though he is first-class in high G.H.Q. appointments. He is worth promoting to major-general in my opinion and I hope you will consider him for this. He certainly deserves it on his record of the last two years.

Ramsden is doing well in command of 30th Corps and he and Gott and I are working well and very closely together. I have Dorman-Smith helping me here and have found him most valuable. Messervy has been deputizing for him as D.C.G.S. but is now off to India to raise and train a new armoured division.

I can not tell you how much I appreciate the way in which the Prime Minister and yourself have given me your confidence, or how grateful I am for all the help you have given and are giving us. I will do my utmost to repay you by sparing no effort to defeat the enemy and remove the imminence of the threat to Egypt, but I do not want to hold out hopes of an early decision. I feel that we have been near it once or twice during the last month, but the scales are very evenly balanced, and on July 1 I would not myself have gambled on our being able to stay on this position for more than a few days. The troops have recovered themselves wonderfully, I think, and have acquired a new tactical technique, based really on the proper use of artillery and the retention of mobility, remarkably quickly. They have still a great deal to learn of course, but the gunners have been very good indeed, and the Boche does not like our shell-fire at all, now that it is centrally controlled and directed. We are using a terrible lot of twenty-five-pounder ammunition, but that can not be helped.

We may yet have to face a withdrawal from our present forward positions, but I hope this will not be necessary. Should it be unavoidable, we have now got a strong defensive position, organized in depth for thirty miles and more, based on strong-points, within supporting field artillery range of each other, and sited to command all the intervening ground and to deny this essential observation to the enemy. These strong-points are to be held by the minimum number of infantry with some artillery, while the great mass of the artillery escorted by sufficient infantry,

who will be fully mobile, is to remain mobile and operate in the intervening spaces, moving to attack the enemy, wherever he may try to penetrate.

Behind this system again is a similar but smaller system based on the Wadi Natrun obstacle which fits in with the western defences of Alexandria, the defences along the water line of the Delta and the Mena defences, which include the Barrage, covering Cairo. Whatever happens I intend to keep the Eighth Army or the greater part of it as a mobile field force. I feel the enemy will need great strength to battle his way through this defence, and that if he tries, this theatre will become even more of a 'second front' than it is now, and become a serious drain on his air and land resources, thus aiding Russia.

Apropos of this demand for a 'second front', we feel that you have already a 'second front' of no mean importance here! As to its being necessary to establish a 'second front' in Europe, Northern Africa and the whole of the Mediterranean basin is, I suggest, really 'Europe' for strategical purposes, and inseparable from it. Would it not be a good thing to try to make the public understand this? . . .

\* \* \*

On July 25 Auchinleck issued a special Order of the Day:

*To all ranks Eighth Army from G.-in-C.*

You have done well. You have turned a retreat into a firm stand and stopped the enemy on the threshold of Egypt. You have done more. You have wrenched the initiative from him by sheer guts and hard fighting and put HIM on the defensive in these last weeks.

He has lost heavily and is short of men, ammunition, petrol and other things. He is trying desperately to bring these over to Africa but the Navy and Air Force are after his ships.

You have borne much but I ask you for more. We must not slacken. If we can stick it we will break him.

STICK TO IT.

The first thrust of the two-pronged attack having failed, was Auchinleck justified in persisting with the second? He himself wrote:

I was firm in my intention to go on hitting the enemy whenever

and wherever I could with the aim of destroying him where he stood.<sup>1</sup>

The launching of the second thrust had been planned, as has been seen, for not more than forty-eight hours after the completion of the first. It should therefore have gone in on the night of July 24-25.

But before the first thrust was delivered—and failed—Auchinleck had already been compelled to accept a forty-eight-hour postponement of the second. This postponement was the result of a conjunction of political and military factors. In the northern sector, in which the Commander-in-Chief proposed to deliver his second and (it was hoped) final blow to Panzer Army, the infantry at the disposal of the corps commander, Ramsden, consisted of the 1st South African and 9th Australian Divisions. The South Africans had been fighting continuously for many weeks, their ranks were thinned, and they were very tired. Ramsden did not believe that it was right to give them a major part in yet one more offensive. In addition, he was not on good terms with their commander, Pienaar. The Australians, too, had been fighting hard since July 10; and, though they were still full of dash and combative spirit, their reinforcement potential was dangerously low. Morshead, their commander, had—as had every operational Dominion commander—the right and the duty of putting his forces into battle only with the permission of his home Government.

When this operation was being planned, Morshead stood courteously but firmly on his right. In a long discussion in Ramsden's caravan Auchinleck pleaded with the Australian, with all the Celtic persuasiveness and fluency of argument of which he was capable. Morshead was quietly adamant. The launching of the attack was put off until July 26-27. To increase the infantry component allotted to it, Auchinleck switched his only remaining United Kingdom infantry formation, the 69th Brigade (properly part of Ramsden's former Division, the 50th) from the southern flank, which was thus left very weak. 'I was ready to risk this,' Auchinleck wrote, 'in order to strengthen 30th Corps.'

On the night of July 26, General Ramsden launched his attack against the enemy's positions to the south of the Tel el Eisa salient with the object of breaching this front and, if conditions permitted, of passing our armoured and motorized formations through the gap to take the enemy in rear and roll up his position from the

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, p. 58.



north. The 9th Australian Division attacking southwards secured Sanyet el Miteiriya by first light, while the 1st South African Division lifted enemy mines to the south of this point, thus enabling the 69th Infantry Brigade to drive westwards with the object of gaining the track running from Miteiriya through Deir el Abyad. The 2nd Armoured Brigade moved during the night from its position south of the Ruweisat Ridge to an assembly area south of the perimeter of the El Alamein fortress, ready to exploit success. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade, comprising light tanks and armoured cars with motorized infantry and artillery, followed the 2nd Armoured Brigade from the 13th Corps front and was given the task of exploiting further, should opportunity offer. The 13th Corps meanwhile carried out vigorous patrolling and feint attacks to deceive the enemy as to the real front of attack and prevent him reinforcing it.

The main attack started well but ended in failure. The Australians captured Miteiriya but were heavily counter-attacked by German infantry and tanks from the south-west, and, though supported by infantry tanks and a strong artillery, were forced back to their original positions. The South Africans experienced great difficulty in clearing gaps in the enemy mine-fields sufficiently safe and wide to be acceptable to the commander of the 1st Armoured Division. This greatly delayed the advance of the 2nd Armoured Brigade in support of the 69th Infantry Brigade, which had made good progress towards its objective though it was unable to establish the strong anti-tank screen on its southern flank which was an essential part of the original plan. About noon the enemy counter-attacked strongly from the west and south and cut off the leading battalions of the 69th Brigade, which the 1st Armoured Division then tried to extricate. Perceiving that the situation had become hopelessly confused and out of control, General Ramsden decided, with my approval, to discontinue the operation and rally the 69th Brigade east of the enemy mine-fields. The brigade has suffered so heavily that it had to be taken out of the line.

The immediate cause of the failure of this operation was the delay in getting the tanks forward to support the 69th Brigade, but the fundamental cause was, as before, the lack of enough fresh well-trained troops to keep up the impetus of the attack and to take full advantage of the large concentration of artillery which had been built up in support.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Despatch, pp. 58-9.

Thus ended, on 27 July 1942, exactly two months of fierce and dramatic combat in the Western Desert. Auchinleck had not fulfilled his resolute purpose of breaking completely the Axis forces in North Africa. But in the month since he had assumed personal command of Eighth Army he had fought Rommel to a standstill; the Axis losses—including seven thousand prisoners, one thousand of whom were German—were crippling; Egypt had been secured from further attack from the Western Desert. Rommel's verdict on his opponent's achievement was forthright:

Although the British losses in this Alamein fighting had been higher than ours, yet the price to Auchinleck had not been excessive, for the one thing that mattered to him was to halt our advance and that, unfortunately, he had done.<sup>1</sup>

The comment of one of his subordinates was just as candid, and served to bring into full, relentless view that element of tragic irony which was never absent from the Desert campaigns of 1940-3. Bayerlein told Desmond Young:

We were very much impressed and very much disturbed by the way you attacked us all through July. You very nearly succeeded in breaking through our positions several times between the 10th and the 26th. If you could have continued to attack for only a couple of days more you would have done so. July 26 was the decisive day. We then had no ammunition at all for our heavy artillery and Rommel had determined to withdraw to the Frontier if the attack was resumed.<sup>2</sup>

On July 27, when the operation map showed the British armour still east of the mine-fields (because Brigadier A. W. Fisher, deputizing for Gatehouse, who had been wounded five days earlier, thought that the mines had not been sufficiently cleared) and the German tanks in their counter-attack moving to the kill of the unprotected infantry on the Mitciriya Ridge, Dorman-Smith laid in front of Auchinleck a full and objective appreciation of the situation, as well as a project for the complete reorganization of the Desert Army in order to ensure that at all times armour and infantry should work under one commander in battle.

He said: 'Without that complete reorganization, which is extremely overdue, we have little hope of doing any better than we have done so far.'

<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> *Rommel* by Desmond Young, p. 165.

Auchinleck read it through, and at 14.45 hours on July 27, without material alteration, agreed to and approved it. This appreciation survived, was reproduced as Appendix 21 of Auchinleck's despatch, and is reproduced as Appendix I of this book. It was to acquire a unique historical importance as the major piece of documentary evidence which was strong enough, over a period of eleven years, to supply grounds for challenging the elaborate apparatus of myth, misunderstanding and mischief by which Auchinleck's handling of his Command and his removal from it were surrounded.

\* \* \*

In the next two days Auchinleck thought hard and quickly about the issues of regrouping and reorganization which the appreciation had raised. A major problem obviously was that of the fundamental weaknesses in the armoured forces which had been only too clearly revealed in the battles of the previous two months.

On July 29 he sent for Major-General (later General Sir Richard) McCreery. This officer, described by Sir Arthur Bryant as 'one of the finest Armoured Divisional commanders in Home Forces',<sup>1</sup> had been sent out by the C.I.G.S. to the Middle East in the previous March to be Auchinleck's adviser on armoured warfare, with the title of Major-General Armoured Forces, an appointment similar and parallel to that of the Major-General Royal Artillery.<sup>2</sup>

Auchinleck pointed out to McCreery what he regarded as two major deficiencies in the armoured forces. The first was the three-squadron formation of armoured regiments, a consequence of which was that, if any regiment suffered severe casualties, it was likely to be amalgamated with a sister unit; Auchinleck regarded this practice as bad for morale and operationally inefficient. He wanted to form four-squadron units, with a greater staying power as units. The other was the blatant and repeated lack of co-operation between the armour and the infantry. Auchinleck proposed that in future, what had hitherto been described as an infantry division should include one armoured brigade, and that the Crusader tanks in the Western Desert should be grouped into a light armoured division (not dissimilar from Rommel's famous *goth Light*). McCreery resisted these suggestions so stubbornly that Auchinleck, when he realized he was making no headway, told him that there was no further use for him if he could not fall in with his Commander-in-Chief's intentions.

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 339.

<sup>2</sup> See above, pp. 475-6.

On July 30 Auchinleck, after exhaustive discussions with Ramsden and Gott, most reluctantly concluded that no further offensive operations were feasible for the present. 'We must therefore,' he said, 'remain temporarily on the defensive and recruit our strength for a new and decisive effort, which did not seem possible before the middle of September.'<sup>1</sup>

He set about preparing, methodically and cheerfully, for this renewed offensive.

*Field-Marshal Rommel to Frau Rommel*

2 August 1942

... I'm thankful for every day's respite we get. A lot of sickness. Unfortunately many of the older officers are going down now. Even I am feeling very tired and limp, though I have got a chance to look after myself a bit just at the moment. ... Holding on to our Alamein position has given us the severest fighting we've yet seen in Africa. We've all got heat diarrhoea now, but it's bearable. ...

Not long afterwards, however, Rommel began to have frequent attacks of fainting; and in a telegram to Hitler signed jointly by General Gause and Professor Horster, his medical adviser, he was diagnosed as suffering from 'chronic stomach and intestinal catarrh, nasal diphtheria and considerable circulation trouble'. The Führer was warned that the Field-Marshal was not in a fit condition to command the forthcoming offensive.

\* \* \*

*Prime Minister to General Auchinleck*

27 July 1942

I have not troubled you with messages while you have been so fearfully engaged, but you and your Army have never been out of our thoughts for an hour.

It seems to me you have the advantage of Rommel in the air, communications and, above all, in the reinforcements which luckily we sent in good time. ...

C.I.G.S. is coming out to you early next week. He will be able to tell you about our plans which are considerable.

As the C.I.G.S. had said in his letter to Auchinleck written on July 17, he was eager to pay his first visit to this vitally important theatre of war. But his *Notes on My Life* reveal the motives underlying this eagerness:

<sup>1</sup> The next offensive, with Gen. Alexander as C.-in-C. and Gen. Montgomery as commander of Eighth Army, was not, in fact, launched until October 23, more than a month after the date offered by Auchinleck.

It was essential that I should go out to see for myself what was really wrong. . . . I had been waiting for days, very precious days, to ask him [Churchill] if I might go to the Middle East on my own. . . . The situation in the Middle East was not improving; and the Auk was suggesting giving the Eighth Army to Corbett. . . .<sup>1</sup>

On the evening of July 15, two days before he wrote to Auchinleck, Brooke sat in the garden at Number Ten Downing Street with Churchill and, finding him in an amenable mood, asked for permission to go. To his joy he was given what he asked.

The visit to London of a high-powered American mission—General Marshall, Admiral King and Mr. Harry Hopkins—absorbed for some ten days the attention of all those concerned in the strategic direction of the war.

The moment the Americans left, Brooke made his preparations for his journey. He was certain that he could accomplish much of value. Meanwhile, however, Churchill, who had been dissuaded by Brooke and Bracken from hastening out to the Middle East at the beginning of the month, was himself subjected to urgent, if hidden, promptings. Throughout July he was, as he later admitted, politically at his weakest; he was also convinced that he was 'without a gleam of military success'.<sup>2</sup> It was not enough that the C.I.G.S. should go:

The doubts I had about the High Command in the Middle East were fed continually by the reports which I received from many quarters. It became urgently necessary for me to go there and settle the decisive questions on the spot.<sup>3</sup>

On July 28 the Prime Minister entertained the King to dinner with the War Cabinet at Number Ten. He obtained His Majesty's permission privately for the swift—and dangerous—journey which he proposed to undertake. When the King had gone, Churchill told the War Cabinet, and was given his colleagues' approval of his proposal that he should go as soon as possible to Cairo, and that he should suggest to Stalin—with whom there were many delicate and difficult issues to discuss, including the abandonment of the idea of a 'Second Front Now'—that he go on from there to Moscow.

At the meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee on the morning of July 30 Brooke was told of this dramatic change of plan. Immediately

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, pp. 431–2.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 408.

afterwards he was summoned to see the Prime Minister and told the reasons for the new decision.

A few days earlier he had found the Prime Minister deeply depressed at the Eighth Army's failure to drive the enemy back from Alamein, 'pouring out questions as to why the Auk could not have done this or that'. Now, faced by a further failure of the tired, punch-drunk Army to dislodge Rommel from his position at the gates of Egypt and by the realization that months might elapse before another offensive was staged, the Prime Minister's impatience with what he regarded as the inexplicable inertia of Middle East Command had become uncontrollable. Only his presence, he felt, could galvanize it into reversing the decision of Knightsbridge and recovering the initiative.<sup>1</sup>

In these few sentences there is crystallized the whole myth which was the cause of Auchinleck's dismissal and the subsequent staining of his reputation—and the reputations of two of his staff officers—in order to uphold and vindicate that cruelly mistaken decision. Mistakes and myths of this character, excusable in war, have no justification at all when they are paraded as history.

At 03.00 hours on the night of July 30–31 a telegram was addressed by the Air Ministry to the C.-in-C. Middle East. It was received at Eighth Army Headquarters at 09.07 hours on the morning of the 31st. It read:

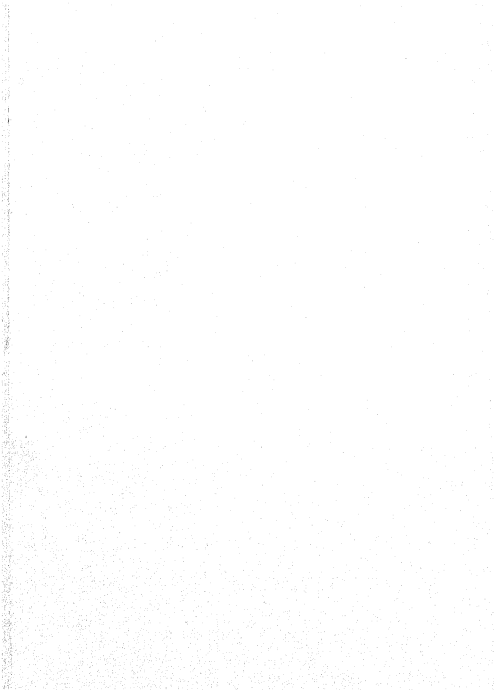
Following for you and Minister of State from Prime Minister to General Auchinleck. Absolutely secret to be deciphered by General Auchinleck's personal assistant.

I hope to arrive in Cairo on Monday, August 3. The C.I.G.S. should arrive by a different route same day. I have asked Field-Marshal Smuts and General Wavell to try to come there during same week.

Let nothing take your eye off the ball.

All unconscious of what was impending, Auchinleck had ordered Ramsden to begin planning intensively for a deliberate attack south of the Tel el Eisa salient with a view to making a rapid advance along the coastal road; he had also instructed Gott to explore the possibilities of breaking through Rommel's defences in the southern sector. These plans, however, were destined never to be executed. The Prime Minister was about to take a hand.

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 433.



## Book IV

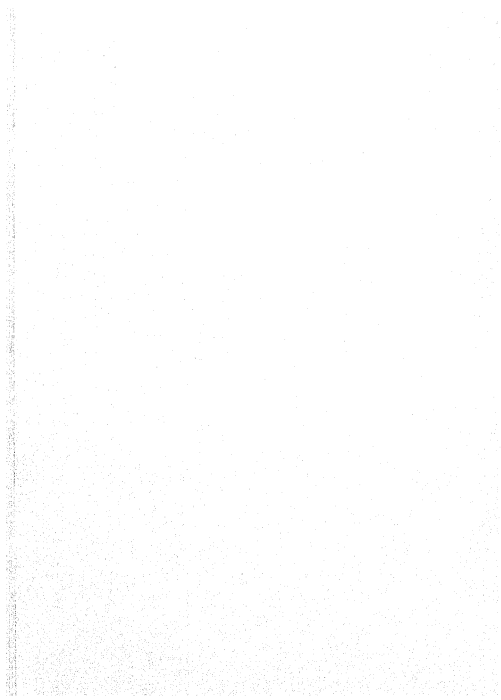
The unconquerable patience and loyalty  
of Belisarius appears either *below* or *above* the  
character of a MAN.

EDWARD GIBBON

I've served in Britain forty years, from Vectis  
to the Wall.  
I have none other home than this, nor any life  
at all.  
Last night I did not understand, but, now the  
hour draws near  
That calls me to my native land, I feel that  
land is here.

RUDYARD KIPLING,  
*The Roman Centurion's Song*





## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### Scapegoats in Cairo

*Prime Minister to C.I.G.S.*

*1 August 1942*

How necessary it is for us to get to the Middle East at once is shown by the following extract from Auchinleck's telegram received yesterday:

'An exhaustive conference on tactical situation held yesterday with corps commanders. Owing to lack of resources and enemy's effective consolidation of his positions we reluctantly concluded that in present circumstances it is not feasible to renew our efforts to break enemy front or turn his southern flank. It is unlikely that an opportunity will arise for resumption of offensive operations before mid-September. Temporarily, therefore, our policy will be defensive, including thorough preparations and consolidations in whole defensive area. In the meantime we shall seize at once any opportunity of taking the offensive suddenly and surprising the enemy. . . .'

This telegram was sent to Brooke while he was flying to Cairo by way of Gibraltar and Malta. The Prime Minister and his principal military adviser were going to the Middle East with radically differing conceptions of what should be done when they got there. Brooke had hoped to form 'calm, unhurried judgments' about the Command before making his recommendations. Now he 'would have to take decisions affecting the whole future of the war with his impetuous master at his elbow'.<sup>1</sup>

Both believed that there was something radically wrong with the Command; but the Prime Minister had not apprehended that, whatever previous shortcomings there had been, whatever reverses had occurred (for which he, with his impetuosity and his interference, bore no small responsibility), the Axis forces had been decisively defeated during July. In Brooke the deep and steadfast awareness of his duty, of his personal and professional responsibilities, were tinged

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, pp. 433-4.

with a cautious, somewhat sombre foreboding. The Prime Minister, as he unashamedly confessed, was looking forward to a rare and exciting jaunt.<sup>1</sup>

In one aspect of Winston Churchill's complex character this mood was natural and pardonable; but there was also an intensely serious side to the outing, of which he was by no means insensible. The issues to be settled in Cairo, as he saw them, were: had Auchinleck or his staff lost the confidence of the Eighth Army, and if so, should he be relieved and by whom?

The probability, therefore, if not the certainty, of having to relieve Auchinleck of his Command was in the forefront of the Prime Minister's mind as he set out on his adventurous and momentous journey. But his explicit reference to Auchinleck's staff wears, in retrospect, a curious significance. All Auchinleck's staff were soldiers, acting under orders; so long as they had obeyed orders to the satisfaction of their Commander-in-Chief, their conduct was no concern of the Prime Minister's. He had every right, if Auchinleck had lost his confidence, to relieve him—as Dill, when he was C.I.G.S., had striven to point out: it was both presumptuous and unworthy of him to busy himself about the activities of officers in subordinate appointments. Reports from many quarters, however, had fed his doubts about the High Command in the Middle East; and those doubts and suspicions strengthened as they were fed.

The Prime Minister and the C.I.G.S. arrived in Cairo on August 3. Five days later General Auchinleck was relieved of his Command. Lieutenant-General Corbett, his C.G.S., and Major-General Dorman-Smith, his D.C.G.S., both of whom had held their appointments for a very short time, were similarly relieved. The steps which led to these decisions must now be traced.

The Prime Minister's mission was given the code-name Operation 'Bracelet'. His entourage comprised Sir Alexander Cadogan of the Foreign Office; his doctor, Sir Charles Wilson (later Lord Moran); Colonel Ian Jacob, Military Assistant Secretary to the War Cabinet; Mr. (later Sir Leslie) Rowan, his Principal Private Secretary; Commander C. R. Thompson; his police body-guard and his valet. They travelled in two Liberators, leaving Lyncham shortly after midnight on the night of August 1-2 and arriving in Cairo shortly before breakfast on the morning of Monday, August 3.

The Prime Minister—using the Ambassador's air-conditioned

<sup>1</sup> 'Now for a short spell I became "the man on the spot". Instead of sitting at home waiting for the news from the front I could send it myself. This was exhilarating.' Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, p. 412.

bedroom and study—got down to work at once. He spent the morning interviewing Casey and Tedder. After lunch he had a talk with Smuts,<sup>1</sup> and then went off for his usual afternoon nap. Brooke in the meantime had talked to Corbett and to Messervy, who had been acting as D.C.G.S. in Dorman-Smith's place since June 25.

At 16.00 hours Auchinleck arrived from Eighth Army Headquarters—his first visit to Cairo since he had flown off five and a half weeks before, with Dorman-Smith, to dismiss Ritchie and assume command in the field. He and Brooke had a short talk and then attended a Commanders-in-Chief conference. At 17.30 hours Auchinleck went to the Embassy, and with Brooke had a long interview with the Prime Minister. When Auchinleck had gone, Churchill called Brooke in for further talks. Brooke noted:

He is fretting that there is to be no offensive action till September 15, and I see already troublesome times ahead.<sup>2</sup>

Jacob recorded in his diary:

The Prime Minister did little or no business for the rest of the evening, and so we all got reasonably early to bed.

The C.I.G.S. was not so fortunate:

After dinner, when I was dropping with sleepiness . . . P.M. again called me in and kept me up till 1.30 a.m. Back to the same arguments that Auk must come back to the Command of Middle East and leave the Eighth Army. Exactly what I have told him from the start. Then he argued strongly for Gott to take over, whilst I know that Gott is very tired. Finally suggested that I should take it over. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Brooke recorded his emotions as he pondered this suggestion of Churchill's. His eagerness to accept it was natural and likeable; his selflessness, high sense of duty and patriotism in refusing it were just as creditable. But it was, in fact, a highly impractical proposal if, as is apparent from Brooke's account, the idea that Auchinleck should be relieved both as C.-in-C. Middle East and as Commander Eighth Army had not yet been broached by either of them to the other.

On Tuesday, August 4 Auchinleck was at his desk by 09.00 hours; Brooke joined him in his office, and they both went to a joint

<sup>1</sup> The South African Prime Minister had flown up to meet Churchill.

<sup>2</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 439.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Commanders-in-Chief conference with Tedder and Harwood. They discussed the relative importance of Egypt as opposed to Abadan, and they all agreed that the latter's importance was paramount.

At noon Brooke went to the Embassy and had an hour with Smuts. Smuts told Brooke that he had a high opinion of Auchinleck, but considered that he selected his subordinates badly, and that several changes were desirable. Most of the changes he suggested coincided with Brooke's own views. The C.I.G.S. clearly had no idea, as yet, that Auchinleck himself might be dismissed.

From the Embassy Brooke went off to the Mohammed Ali Club, to lunch with Auchinleck, Harwood and Tedder. That dining-room had been the scene of Auchinleck's and Dorman-Smith's 'last good meal' before they went up to Bagush. The C.I.G.S. and the Commander-in-Chief returned to G.H.Q. for a long discussion, which Brooke described as 'most useful'.

Brooke found that he and Auchinleck were in agreement on the necessary changes. He listed them in his diary: (a) New commander for Eighth Army—Montgomery; (b) New C.G.S. to be selected in place of Corbett; (c) Wilson too old, and to be replaced by Gott.

Two cardinal points emerge from a study of the events so far during this 'fruitful' day, as Brooke described it: first, that the C.I.G.S. was in full agreement<sup>1</sup> with the strategic doctrine—that the retention of the Persian Gulf oil resources and of Iraq was more important than the retention of Egypt—which Auchinleck had again and again propounded to London, for which again and again he had been rebuked; and second, that on the afternoon of August 4 Auchinleck accepted the proposal that Montgomery should assume command of Eighth Army under himself as Commander-in-Chief.

Brooke admitted that he was surprised by Auchinleck's attitude on this latter point:

I had expected some opposition, but I felt some very serious doubts as to whether an Auk-Monty combination would work. I felt that the Auk would interfere too much with Monty; would ride him on too tight a rein, and would consequently be liable to put him out of his stride. As I was very anxious to place Monty in command of the Eighth Army, I felt this might necessitate moving the Auk to some other command. . . .<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Brooke gave cogent reasons for this agreement. See *The Turn of the Tide*, p. 440.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 441-2. Judged by Auchinleck's actions and behaviour over his whole career—and not merely the isolated, if crucial, episode of his

At six o'clock that evening the Prime Minister presided over a big conference in his study at the Embassy. Those present were the C.I.G.S., Smuts, Wavell, Auchinleck, Harwood, Tedder, Casey and Jacob. Churchill reviewed the whole situation in the light of decisions taken recently, while the Americans were in London, and the effect of those decisions on future policy in the Middle East. Towards the end of a discussion which lasted close on three hours the Prime Minister cross-questioned Auchinleck about the probable date of his offensive. It was obvious to the C.I.G.S. that Churchill did not like the answer which was given.

He is again pressing for an attack before Auchinleck can possibly get ready. I find him almost impossible to argue with on this point.<sup>1</sup>

After dinner Churchill interrogated Brooke on the results of his day's work. Brooke's suggestion that Montgomery should command Eighth Army won no approbation. The Prime Minister's affections were fixed now on Gott (whom he had never met); he asserted that Montgomery could not possibly arrive in time to hurry on the attack, and brushed aside Brooke's arguments that Auchinleck did not think that Gott was up to it, and that Gott himself was tired. It was again well past midnight when Brooke was permitted to go to bed.

They were up at 04.45 hours on August 5, because Churchill and Brooke were to be taken on a conducted tour of the forward areas in the Western Desert. Auchinleck was up even earlier than his visitors. Accompanied by Dorman-Smith, who had come back to Cairo two days before to take up his proper appointment, he flew ahead to Burg el Arab airfield (some twenty miles west of Alexandria) in order to be able to welcome his guests and guide them on at least part of their trip.

Auchinleck took the Prime Minister in his car; Brooke went with Tedder and Coningham, who were also in attendance at the airfield. The idea of a cavalcade of cars had been strongly deprecated

relationship with Ritchie—this was an odd but significant misunderstanding of his character. It is also interesting to note that ten months later at Algiers, after the conclusion of Alexander's victorious campaign in North Africa, Brooke, in a shrewd assessment of Montgomery's character, observed, 'He wants guiding and watching continually, and I do not think that Alex is sufficiently strong and rough with him.' (Ibid. p. 641.)

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 441.

by both the R.A.F. and the Army; the numbers of the entourage were, therefore, kept to a minimum. They went straight up the road to El Alamein, where they met Pienaar and Morshead. From El Alamein they drove to Eighth Army Headquarters. 'The Auk,' wrote Brooke, 'gave us a light breakfast.'<sup>1</sup> 'We were given breakfast,' Churchill wrote, 'in a cage full of flies and high military personages.'<sup>2</sup>

Auchinleck was severely criticized for the situation he had chosen and for the austerity and the lack of gracious amenities in his Headquarters at this time.<sup>3</sup> In Churchill's words there was the lash of unforgotten irritation. But it is difficult to see why, in the commander of an army in the field, the simplicity—the roughness even—of his living and working conditions should be held against him.

The criticism of its siting can be answered briefly: it worked. From this Headquarters Rommel was defeated. It was in the middle of the Front, in close touch with the Headquarters of both corps. From the Alam Halfa ridge, three miles away, Auchinleck could observe much of the whole battle area. Its main defect was that it was exposed to the Luftwaffe's fighter sweep—not a bad defect in the headquarters of a general who had to rally a beaten army—and its vehicles had to be few and widely dispersed. But it was the one place from which, in his own belief, Auchinleck could effectively command Eighth Army.

He himself ate and slept as did the rest of the army. He kept his kit packed by day and his vehicles handy, because he was less than twelve miles from the exposed southern flank, and because the Panzer Army—if he had let it move—would have moved fast. Throughout the critical month which had just ended when Churchill arrived, he and his staff hardly noticed what they ate or where they slept or even the flies that buzzed. It was all very different from the comforts of Cairo; but Rommel, whom Churchill regarded with

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 442.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 414.

<sup>3</sup> 'It was grotesquely inaccessible both to the main road and to the front. . . . There were no sleeping quarters: officers and men slept on the open sand or at the foot of their trucks dispersed about the desolate landscape. A good deal of their business was conducted in the open under the blazing sun. In the handful of command vehicles there was a shortage of clerks, signallers, typewriters, and most of the office equipment usually found in a headquarters. Meals of cold bully beef and sandy cheese were eaten in the open. Even Auchinleck slept beside his caravan. Occasional dust-storms . . . swept across the escarpment. As these passed, innumerable swarms of flies settled upon every living thing. . . .' *Montgomery* by Alan Moorehead, p. 116.

mingled awe and fascination, fought and worked under just the same conditions.

After breakfast Churchill was taken by Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith into the operations caravan. The Prime Minister gazed intently at the wall map, thrusting his thumb and fingers across it as if they were battle-tested formations. 'Attack, attack,' he demanded. Then he became persuasive. The 44th Division had just arrived from the United Kingdom: why was it not being committed immediately to the offensive? Courteously and firmly Auchinleck explained his reasons for not putting a fresh, unacclimatized division, untrained in desert warfare, straight into the field.

The Prime Minister's mood darkened. Auchinleck was adamant. Churchill rounded on Dorman-Smith, who supported his Chief. Because these two officers acted as they did that morning, a division was not squandered and many men's lives were saved, but they set the seal on their own professional doom.

Churchill walked out of the caravan and stood alone, his hands clasped behind his back. For some minutes he glowered at the bleak landscape. His farewells were curt; he summoned Gott to drive with him to the airfield, which was his next stop. In their conversation in the car, Gott admitted that he was tired and that he would like nothing better than three months' leave in England; but he assured Churchill that he was capable of immediate further efforts and of assuming any responsibilities which might be confided to him.

They parted at the airfield, never to meet again. 'Mary' Coningham flew Churchill in a quarter of an hour to the Headquarters of the Desert Air Force. Here there was waiting a large company of senior R.A.F. officers, from group captain upwards; a special luncheon had been arranged, and a car was bringing the dainties all the way from Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo. There were flickers of anxiety because the car had gone astray. However, it arrived, and hosts and guest sat down to a meal very different from the 'light breakfast' offered by Eighth Army H.Q.

Churchill described it as 'a gay occasion in the midst of care—a real oasis in a very large desert'.<sup>1</sup> Despite its gaiety he was able to perceive that the R.A.F. were very critical of the Army.

The C.I.G.S., meanwhile, had had more work and less fun. He drove from Eighth Army H.Q. along Ruweisat Ridge, he lunched with Briggs at 5th Indian Division H.Q., then he turned south to see Gott at 13th Corps. His impression of Gott differed markedly from that which Churchill had received earlier in the day. To

<sup>1</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 415.



Brooke, as to Churchill, Gott admitted that he was tired. But he added candidly:

I think what is required out here is some new blood. I have tried most of my ideas on the Boche. We want someone with new ideas and plenty of confidence in them.<sup>1</sup>

Wondering how difficult it would be to overcome, in Churchill's mind, the prejudice which had so rapidly and so firmly developed in favour of Gott, Brooke went back to Eighth Army H.Q. and had tea with Auchinleck. Then he drove to Burg el Arab and flew to Heliopolis. It had been, he thought, an interesting day.

His tour had been intensive and thorough. He had had ample opportunity to interview commanders, and to study Auchinleck's defensive lay-out and further plans, which were based on the appreciation of July 27. He made no criticism either of the lay-out or of the plans.

There was another distinguished visitor to Eighth Army that day—Wavell, who came alone. He, too, saw the lay-out and studied the plans. He observed meditatively to Dorman-Smith: 'Eric, you're very strongly posted here. Have you considered making a feint withdrawal so as to lure Rommel into attack?'

Dorman-Smith said that this idea had been considered. They had rejected it in favour of standing where they were.

The significance of this conversation, as of Brooke's lack of comment on Eighth Army's plans and dispositions, was that—in contrast with criticisms which were subsequently levelled—neither the C.I.G.S. nor Wavell, on August 5, had any fault to find with these plans and dispositions.

Wavell's question to Dorman-Smith was penetrating, and the answer he received was without doubt the right answer. But in point of fact, Rommel was in no state to launch an attack, even if Eighth Army had tried to lure him into it. Merely holding on to his El Alamein position had given him and his troops, as he told his wife, the severest fighting they had yet seen in Africa. He was far more conscious of the extent of his own failure and defeat than were his opponents: his Army's sickness rate, particularly among senior officers, was very high (much higher than Eighth Army's); his supply position was critical; and the R.A.F. maintained continuous and relentless attacks on his lines of communication. The future seemed to him far from bright.

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 443.

Auchinleck, by contrast, was conscious not, of course, of final victory, but of a measure of success which six weeks earlier would have seemed impossible. His supply and reinforcement situation was much healthier than Rommel's; after the essential re-equipment and training, he was confident that he would be able to launch a direct attack on Rommel in late September.

This was the real state of affairs on August 5. But Churchill saw it in a very different light:

*Prime Minister to Deputy Prime Minister*

*5 August 1942*

Just returned from a long but invigorating day with Eighth Army, visiting Alamein and Ruweisat and seeing South African and Australian troops, interviewing Generals Morshead, Ramsden, and Gott, spending morning with Auchinleck and afternoon with Tedder, Coningham, and the Royal Air Force. Troops were very cheerful, and all seem confident and proud of themselves, but bewildered at having been baulked of victory on repeated occasions. I propose to visit all the formations both forward and rear while pondering on the recommendations I shall have to make to the Cabinet.

I am discussing the whole situation with Smuts, who is a fount of wisdom. Wherever the fault may lie for the serious situation which exists, it is certainly not with the troops, and only to a minor extent with their equipment.

I am purposely keeping my future movements vague. . . . This change and open air are doing me a great deal of good.

\* \* \*

August 6 was the day of decision for Operation 'Bracelet'. The dispositions of those involved were as follows: Churchill, Smuts, Brooke and Wavell were in Cairo; Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith were at Eighth Army Headquarters; Gott was at 13th Corps; Maitland Wilson was in Cairo, in pursuance of his enquiries into the fall of Tobruk; Sir Ronald Adam, the Adjutant-General, was also in Cairo, on the first stage of a long tour overseas; Corbett, Auchinleck's C.G.S., was once more deputing for him. In and around G.H.Q. were many disgruntled officers, whose resentments and jealousies had not decreased because Rommel had been beaten and their lives had been saved. The stew-pot sizzled with poison.

For the Prime Minister the day began abruptly and zestfully. He burst into Brooke's bedroom, to find him beginning to put on his

clothes. Churchill was very elated and announced, 'My thoughts are taking shape. I shall soon commit myself to paper.'

Brooke commented: 'I rather shuddered and wondered what he was up to!'<sup>1</sup>

Ten minutes later the irrepressible Prime Minister bounced into Brooke's room once more. 'Come and have breakfast with me,' he cried.

But Brooke was half-way through his own meal.

'Oh well, come along to my bedroom as soon as you've finished,' and off he hurried.

When I went round he made me sit on the sofa whilst he walked up and down. First of all, he said, he had decided to split the Middle East Command in two. A Near East taking up to the Canal, and a Middle East taking Syria, Palestine, Persia and Iraq. I argued with him again that the Canal was an impossible boundary as both Palestine and Syria are based administratively on Egypt. He partially agreed, and then went on to say that he intended to remove the Auk to the Persian-Iraqi Command as he had lost confidence in him. And he wanted me to take over the Near East Command with Montgomery as my Eighth Army Commander. This made my heart race very fast! He said he did not require an answer at once, and that I could think it over if I wanted. However, I told him without waiting that I was quite certain it would be a wrong move. . . . Another point which I did not mention was that, after working with the P.M. for close on nine months, I do feel at last that I can exercise a limited amount of control on some of his activities and that at last he is beginning to take my advice. I feel, therefore, that, tempting as the offer is, by accepting it I should definitely be taking a course which would on the whole help the war least. Finally, I could not bear the thought that Auchinleck might think that I had come out here on purpose to work myself into his shoes.<sup>2</sup>

Brooke's refusal did not please Churchill, but he accepted it with grace. At 10.30 hours there was a conference: the Prime Minister, Smuts, the C.I.G.S., Corbett, Adam and Lindsell.<sup>3</sup> Its purpose was to thrash out details of the 'tail' of the Army, which was an obsession of Churchill's. Corbett, whom the Prime Minister mercilessly

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 444.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 444-5.

<sup>3</sup> Lieut.-Gen. Sir Wilfred Lindsell, Principal Administrative Officer, G.H.Q., M.E.F.

described as 'a very small, agreeable man, of no personality and little experience', stood up for his own point of view, and Churchill lost his temper with him. Brooke took Corbett, Lindsell and Adam out on to the lawn, to decide on the action that should be taken to meet the Prime Minister's requirements.

After luncheon Smuts tried to persuade Brooke to accept Churchill's suggestion. Brooke deployed his arguments again, and succeeded in getting Smuts to agree that Alexander was a better choice than himself. He then went over to G.H.Q. and saw Lumsden, Freyberg and Maitland Wilson. He moved on to a meeting of the Adjutant-General's which was seeking to arrange an amalgamation of units, because reinforcements were so short.

While he was at this conference the C.I.G.S. was sent for by Churchill. Smuts was with Churchill in his room at the Embassy. Brooke read the draft of a telegram from the Prime Minister to the War Cabinet, which embodied his final decisions. Brooke accepted it. All things considered, he thought it the best solution.

*Prime Minister to Deputy Prime Minister 6 August 1942. 20.15 hrs.*

As a result of such enquiry as I have made here, and after prolonged consultations with Field-Marshal Smuts and C.I.G.S. and Minister of State, I have come to the conclusion that a drastic and immediate change is needed in the High Command.

2. I therefore propose that the Middle East Command shall be reorganized into two separate Commands, namely:

(a) 'Near East Command', comprising Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, with its centre in Cairo, and

(b) 'Middle East Command', comprising Persia and Iraq, with its centre in Basra or Baghdad.

The Eighth and Ninth Armies fall within the first and the Tenth Army in the second of these Commands.

3. General Auchinleck to be offered the post of C.-in-C. the new Middle East Command. The title remains the same, but its scope is reduced. It may, however, become more important later. It also preserves General Auchinleck's association with India. It must be remembered that General Wavell's appointment as C.-in-C. India was for the duration of the war, and that the India Office have always desired that Auchinleck should return there if possible. I know of nothing that should prevent the eventual realization of this plan, though of course no promise can be made in respect of events which are unforeseeable.

4. General Alexander to be Commander-in-Chief the Near East.

5. General Montgomery to succeed Alexander in 'Torch'.<sup>1</sup> I regret the need of moving Alexander from 'Torch', but Montgomery is in every way qualified to succeed.

6. General Gott to command the Eighth Army under Alexander.

7. General Corbett to be relieved as C.G.S. Near East.

8. General Ramsden to be relieved as G.O.C. 30th Corps.

9. General Dorman-Smith to be relieved as Deputy C.G.S.

10. It will be necessary to find two corps commanders for the Eighth Army in the place of Gott and Ramsden. We have ideas for both these posts, but it would be better for the C.I.G.S. to discuss these and a number of junior changes which require to be made with Gott and Alexander when the last-named arrives. . . .

12. The above constitute the major simultaneous changes which the gravity and urgency of the situation here require. I shall be grateful to my War Cabinet colleagues if they will approve them. Smuts and C.I.G.S. wish me to say they are in full agreement that amid many difficulties and alternatives this is the right course to pursue. The Minister of State is also in full agreement. I have no doubt the changes will impart a new and vigorous impulse to the Army and restore confidence in the Command, which I regret does not exist at the present time. Here I must emphasize the need of a new start and vehement action to animate the whole of this vast but baffled and somewhat unhinged organization. The War Cabinet will not fail to realize that a victory over Rommel in August or September may have a decisive effect upon the attitude of the French in North Africa when 'Torch' begins.

13. I hope I may receive Cabinet approval at the earliest possible moment, and that Alexander will start forthwith. It is necessary that he should reach here before I and the C.I.G.S. start for Russia. This I hope to do Sunday or Monday. The changes should become effective from Monday, and public announcements must follow at the earliest moment compatible with the interests of the fighting front. Meanwhile the utmost secrecy must be observed.

Certain matters in this historic telegram demand careful elucidation. It must be realized that it was the product of the intense

<sup>1</sup> 'Torch' was the code-name for the joint Anglo-American landing in French North Africa agreed upon during the Americans' visit to London in July. Eisenhower had been selected as Supreme Allied Commander for this operation, Alexander as the commander of the British First Army which was to play a leading part in it.

confusion and profound misapprehension prevailing in the minds of both Churchill and Smuts. They were convinced—and nothing that they had seen or heard in the forty-eight hours during which they had been in the Middle East had made them alter their view—that the Eighth Army, beaten at Gazala, beaten in the Cauldron and beaten at Mersa Matruh, had also lost the first battle of El Alamein and had been defeated in the month's hard fighting which followed it. Much that they had been told had indeed confirmed them in this mistaken opinion. The effective decisions were Churchill's, but he was sustained in them by the agreement and support of Smuts, for whom he had a deep admiration and affection.

Both were politically very sore about the reverses in the Middle East; they arrived in Cairo with strongly rooted misconceptions in their minds which it would have required a gale of truth to overthrow. Such home truths as Churchill heard he scorned. Everyone—even Gott himself—told him that Gott was tired: he brushed the idea aside. Corbett explained the large, apparently non-combatant 'tail' of the Army: Churchill lost his temper. Auchinleck, supported by Dorman-Smith, refused to commit Eighth Army to a premature offensive: Churchill stood and raged in the Desert.

But to the angry and unjust accusations, the smooth explanations and shiftings of the blame, he hearkened. Of these there was no shortage. There was good cause for some of the wrath that was vented in Cairo in these days. Pienaar and Theron mourned the loss of the 2nd South African Division. Freyberg was indignant at the casualties suffered by the New Zealanders and the shortcomings of the British armour. Who, however, were responsible for the calamities which they lamented? The men who were penalized were Corbett, Ramsden and Dorman-Smith. The first-named, who had held his appointment for less than six months, had never had any operational responsibility of any kind. Ramsden, taking over 30th Corps in mid-July from Norrie, had fought the final battles in his sector with skill and a large measure of success; previously he had led 50th Division with great distinction. Dorman-Smith had been D.C.G.S. since mid-May, and Auchinleck's principal staff officer in the field from June 25 onwards; his share, though necessarily subordinate, in turning defeat into victory had not been small. Immediate relegation was their reward. Along with Auchinleck, they were the scapegoats.

But what of Ritchie? Or of Whiteley? Norrie, Lumsden and Messervy? Or Fisher who would not send his armour through a mine-field because he thought it insufficiently cleared? Or the brigadier who would not let his Grant tanks move by night? What

of Gott, with his pessimistic fear of the worst, and his fatigue, and his self-confessed lack of ideas? He was to command Eighth Army.

What of McCreery, the Major-General Armoured Forces whom Auchinleck had so recently relieved of his appointment? On August 7 Brooke, looking for a successor to Corbett as C.G.S. 'at once thought of Dick McCreery':

I knew his ability well and I also knew that he had acted as G.S.O.1 of the 1st Division. . . . I therefore decided to suggest him to Alex as soon as he arrived. . . .<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

Personalities and policy in this crisis were inextricably entangled. On the plane of high policy, Ian Jacob's diary is a meticulous and photographic contemporary record not only of motives and intentions but of the emotional background to those intentions:

The Prime Minister had found a disturbing state of affairs in the Army in the Middle East. It had received a severe beating in a battle which everybody thought should have been won. The Army was bewildered, and no longer a coherent fighting machine. Some striking change was therefore required to offer a stimulus to the troops. On the other hand, the Prime Minister had a great opinion of General Auchinleck, and was most averse to the idea that his services should be lost to the State. He felt that if General Auchinleck had been freed from the responsibility for the Levant-Caspian front, and had been able to concentrate on the Western Desert, he could have taken command when the battle broke out, instead of waiting till the situation was desperate. This might well have turned the scale and given us a victory instead of a defeat. The Prime Minister was therefore determined that the best possible fighting soldier should be placed in command in the Middle East, and that he should have nothing to think of except the battle against Rommel, which he would personally conduct.

The C.I.G.S. was in agreement with the Prime Minister over the proposal to split off Persia and Iraq, though for a rather different reason. He felt that it was wrong for an area of such vital importance as Persia and Iraq to remain any longer as the Cinderella of either the Middle East or of India. He wanted some-

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 450.

one to be able to give it his entire attention, and to drive on the preparations so badly needed for the reception of large forces for 1943.

The C.I.G.S. and the Prime Minister did not see eye to eye on the subject of the conduct of the battle by the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East. C.I.G.S. held the orthodox view that the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, should give general directions, but should leave the whole conduct of the battle itself to the commander of the Eighth Army. This difference of opinion did not declare itself in the terms of the telegram sent home, on which all were agreed.

Brooke's *Notes on My Life* supply an interesting gloss:

This memorable day [August 6] finished with my agreement with Winston's wire to the Cabinet. Most of it was entirely in accordance with the advice I had given him. The only major point in which it varied was in the appointment of Gott instead of Montgomery to the Eighth Army. I had very serious misgivings concerning Gott's appointment in his tired state, but was not at that time sufficiently convinced of the degree of this disadvantage to oppose the appointment.<sup>1</sup>

The despatch of the telegram brought an arduous day to an end; Brooke described it in his diary as 'one of the most difficult days of my life, with momentous decisions to take as far as my own future and the war was concerned'.<sup>2</sup>

So far as Auchinleck's future was concerned there had also been some momentous decisions. For him Operation 'Bracelet' had become Operation 'Belisarius'. Nobody ventured to point this out in Cairo that night—it is unlikely that Churchill would have enjoyed being likened to Justinian—but what did Wavell think, who thirteen months earlier had travelled the same stony road?

\* \* \*

In London the War Cabinet met at once to consider Churchill's telegram. In their reply they approved the selection of Alexander as C.-in-C., and agreed to Montgomery replacing Alexander in 'Torch'; they raised objections, both politically and strategically sound, to the separation of the Middle East into two Commands.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 448.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 444.



The other appointments they were content to leave in Churchill's hands. Churchill, in a further telegram dated August 6-7, explained his suggestions in considerable detail, pointed out that he had the full agreement of Smuts and the C.I.G.S., and asked for swift authorization of his proposals:

A decision has now become most urgent, since Alexander has already started and Auchinleck has of course no inkling of what is in prospect. I must apprise him tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

The War Cabinet gave in on the matter of the division of the Command, but represented that, if Auchinleck were appointed to Command in Persia and Iraq, the continuance of the title of Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, would lead to confusion and misrepresentation. Churchill conceded them this point and went off to spend the afternoon with the newly arrived 51st Highland Division. Brooke talked to Adam and Wavell. His diary also recorded interviews with Corbett and Dorman-Smith.

Auchinleck had asked Brooke to see Dorman-Smith in order that the C.I.G.S. should be informed of his proposal to reorganize the Middle East divisions into formations consisting of two motorized infantry brigades and one armoured brigade. During this discussion there was no mention of the decision reached about Dorman-Smith's future.<sup>2</sup>

Dorman-Smith had flown down from Eighth Army H.Q. in a battered aircraft which had made two forced landings on the way. Gott, an hour or two later, flew the same route in a slow transport aircraft. An individual German fighter, driven down from high-altitude combat, was hurrying home much nearer ground level: it came across Gott's aircraft and shot it down in flames.

The news of this casualty reached the Embassy in Cairo just before dinner. At Eighth Army Headquarters Auchinleck, too, had heard. He telephoned the C.I.G.S. in Cairo and arranged with him that Montgomery should come out from England to take over Eighth Army.

'It was obviously impossible for me,' Auchinleck wrote, 'to continue indefinitely in the dual role of Army commander and Commander-in-Chief.'<sup>3</sup> But what he did not know on the evening of

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 418.

<sup>2</sup> In fact this officer did not know, until the publication of Churchill's *The Second World War*, Vol. IV, that the decision was made by the Prime Minister himself.

<sup>3</sup> Despatch, p. 23.

August 7 was that the Prime Minister had decided to take both roles from him.

Churchill was distressed by Gott's sudden death and exasperated that his plans had been upset. After dinner he conferred with Smuts and the C.I.G.S. about a replacement for Gott. Brooke pressed for Montgomery; Churchill was in favour of Maitland Wilson, but when Smuts supported Brooke he gave way and agreed to Montgomery.

*Prime Minister to Deputy Prime Minister*

*7 August 1942*

C.I.G.S. decisively recommends Montgomery for Eighth Army. Smuts and I feel this post must be filled at once. Pray send him by special plane at earliest moment. Advise me when he will arrive.

Shortly before one o'clock in the morning Churchill grew restive. Jacob was bidden to put a telephone call through to London, to get the answer to this telegram. The call came through over an hour and a half later; the War Cabinet were still sitting; Ismay, who spoke to Jacob, could give him no answer. At 05.55 hours the Deputy Prime Minister's signal was handed to Jacob, who had been trying to snatch a couple of hours' sleep on the sofa in his office. It contained a reluctant approval and the information that the necessary orders were being given about Montgomery.

During the night Churchill had bidden Jacob go up to Eighth Army H.Q. to take Auchinleck the formal letter telling him of his removal. After breakfast Jacob flew to Burg el Arab and motored the thirty miles forward that Churchill had travelled three days before. It was a little past noon when he reached his destination. Angus Mackinnon, Auchinleck's P.A., met him and took him into the Chief's caravan. Auchinleck, sitting at work, greeted Jacob in a friendly way and bade him sit down. Jacob offered him, as he had been ordered to do, the condolences of the Prime Minister and the C.I.G.S. on Gott's death. He then handed him Churchill's letter.

It read:

*Cairo*

*8 August 1942*

Dear General Auchinleck,

On June 23 you raised in your telegram to the C.I.G.S. the question of your being relieved in this Command, and you mentioned the name of General Alexander as a possible successor. At that time of crisis to the Army His Majesty's Government did not wish to avail themselves of your high-minded offer. At the same time you had taken over the effective command of the battle, as

I had long ago desired and had suggested to you in my telegram of May 20. You stemmed the adverse tide and at the present time the front is stabilized.

2. The War Cabinet have now decided, for the reasons which you yourself had used, that the moment has come for a change. It is proposed to detach Iraq and Persia from the present Middle Eastern theatre. Alexander will be appointed to command the Middle East, Montgomery to command the Eighth Army, and I offer you the Command of Iraq and Persia including the Tenth Army, with Headquarters at Basra or Baghdad. It is true that this sphere is today smaller than the Middle East, but it may in a few months become the scene of decisive operations and reinforcements to the Tenth Army are already on the way. In this theatre, of which you have special experience, you will preserve your associations with India. I hope therefore that you will comply with my wish and directions with the same disinterested public spirit that you have shown on all occasions. Alexander will arrive almost immediately, and I hope that early next week, subject of course to the movements of the enemy, it may be possible to effect the transfer of responsibility on the Western battlefront with the utmost smoothness and efficiency.

3. I shall be very glad to see you at any convenient time if you should so desire.

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

WINSTON S. CHURCHILL.

This was Jacob's account of the whole episode:

I felt as if I were just going to murder an unsuspecting friend. . . . I handed the C.-in-C. the letter I had brought. He opened it and read it through two or three times in silence. He did not move a muscle, and remained outwardly calm, and in complete control of himself. He then asked me whether it was intended that Persia should be under India. I told him that it was not so, the whole idea being that there should be three independent Commands. We discussed this for a bit, and then he led me out into the open, and we wandered about while he cleared his mind by talking to me. He said that it was a very evenly balanced question as to whether Iraq and Persia should come under India, or under the Middle East, but that it would never work to make an independent Command in those two countries. He felt that sooner or later they would inevitably come under India.

He then discussed the question of whether he could accept the proposed new Command. He stated emphatically that he was not actuated by motives of pique at being turned out of his present appointment, but that he was convinced that he could not accept what was offered. He had been C.-in-C., India, and C.-in-C., Middle East, and now he was asked to take a position which was virtually that of one of his own Army commanders. The fact that he was being moved would indicate to the Army that he had lost the confidence of the Government, and had failed in his task. They would regard his acceptance of the Iraq and Persian Command as a face-saving device. The Indian Army, whose Commander-in-Chief he had been, would certainly not understand the transaction. He could hardly in these circumstances retain the confidence of the troops, and by reason of this invidious position he could hardly have confidence in himself. He would thus not be a successful commander, and the Government would do much better to let him retire into oblivion. He greatly disliked the idea of the appointment of unsuccessful generals to other posts. . . . He had always determined, when his time came, to set his face against accepting any sop. I felt bound to say that I had never imagined that he would take up any other attitude, and that I had told the C.I.G.S. this straight. Nevertheless, I knew the Prime Minister very much hoped that he would find it possible to accept the offer.

Jacob's last words in his diary entry for August 8 were:

I could not have admired more the way General Auchinleck received me, and his attitude throughout. A great man and a great fighter.

Jacob was back in Cairo by 17.00 hours. An hour later the Prime Minister woke up from his afternoon rest, and Jacob had to go and recount to him what had passed between himself and Auchinleck.

The C.I.G.S. joined us, and I was rather surprised to find that the Prime Minister seemed to understand General Auchinleck's point of view, and his mind seemed to be veering towards putting Iraq and Persia under India. His mind is entirely fixed on the defeat of Rommel, and on getting General Alexander into complete charge of the operations in the Western Desert. He does not understand how a man can remain in Cairo while great events are occurring in the Desert, and leave the conduct of them to

someone else. He strode up and down declaiming on this point, and he means to have his way. 'Rommel, Rommel, Rommel, Rommel,' he cried, 'what else matters but beating him. Instead of which, C.-in-C., Middle East sits in Cairo attending to things which a Minister, or a quartermaster, could deal with.'<sup>1</sup>

That scene in the Ambassador's study in Cairo crystallized two at least of Churchill's fundamental misconceptions. The first was, as Brooke ruefully recorded in his diary, his belief that the functions of the Commander-in-Chief and of the commander of Eighth Army were exactly the same; to this Brooke replied with 'a long discourse on the system of the chain of command in the Army'. Brooke added, 'I fear that it did not sink in much deeper than it has before.'<sup>2</sup>

An obstinate refusal to pay much regard to the established procedure of commands and staffs in the Army could be construed as a properly vigorous contempt for red tape and unnecessary convention, and, therefore, not merely pardonable but praiseworthy. But Churchill's second misconception was far more corrosive. He blinded himself to the truth, which was that for the past six weeks Auchinleck had not been sitting in Cairo, while great events were occurring in the Desert, attending to matters appropriate to either a Minister or a quartermaster, but at the Tactical Headquarters of Eighth Army, directing those great events and beating Rommel to a standstill.

It would perhaps have been more helpful to strive to remove this misconception than to attempt—vainly, as it proved—to clear up Churchill's disdainful muddle-headedness about the administrative procedure of the Army.

\* \* \*

That night at Eighth Army Headquarters the new B.G.S. sat down and wrote this letter:

My dear Chief,

It was a very great shock to hear your news this evening. The injustice of it all is difficult to believe. As you must realize I am utterly sorry that it should have happened, and I am convinced that they will regret the decision—a decision obviously arrived at so as to turn aside criticism from its rightful target. I'm afraid it is also a victory for the old and privileged school.

<sup>1</sup> Sir Ian Jacob: Diary, 8 August 1942.

<sup>2</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, pp. 451-2.

As to the 'offer'. It is of course a decision that only you can make. I don't wish to make comparisons, but my old boss Leslie H.-B.<sup>1</sup> was offered the Board of Trade. But he refused. He felt he was right but I always felt later he was sorry.

I do fully appreciate the other point of view. You may feel you will be sitting on a stool between two chairs in which at one time or another you once sat. But who knows how the wheel will spin?

You know that it was only because of the help I knew I should get from you that I did not refuse this job point-blank. My lack of experience in this particular line was great.

Every possible good wish for the future, and my gratitude for all your kindness to me.

You will be missed by many from this arid land.

Yours,

FREDDIE DE GUINGAND.

Auchinleck came in from the Desert at noon on Sunday, August 9. He had a brief talk with Brooke in G.H.Q. and then went across to the Embassy. Before he was ushered in to see Churchill he spent about five minutes with Jacob.

He seemed not to have changed his mind at all since the previous day, and I gave him an account of the reception which the Prime Minister had given to my description of his attitude. I told him that on hearing that he was unwilling to accept the post offered to him, the Prime Minister's mind seemed to have moved towards handing Iraq and Persia over to India. General Auchinleck then said that this seemed to confirm an idea which had crossed his mind that the offer was made to him in the certainty that he would refuse, so that the hand-over to India could then be proceeded with, and it could be said that an appointment had been offered to him but that he had refused to accept it. I did my best to destroy this idea.<sup>2</sup>

Auchinleck went into the Prime Minister's room, and remained there for an hour. Their conversation, said Churchill, 'was at once bleak and impeccable'.<sup>3</sup>

*Prime Minister to General Ismay*

10 August 1942

... General Auchinleck is disinclined to accept the Command

<sup>1</sup> Hore-Belisha.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Ian Jacob: Diary, 9 August 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 423.

of the Iraq-Persia theatre. . . . As, however, I am convinced that he is the best man for the job, I have given him a few days more to consider the matter further. I shall not press him unduly, but I am anxious that he should not take his decision while under the immediate effects of the blow, which he has accepted with dignity, but naturally not without distress.

Appropriate military authorities are studying the problem connected with the proposed institution of a separate Command for Iraq and Persia and the administrative changes consequent thereupon. I should be glad if at the same time the Chiefs of Staff would also propose the best methods for giving effect to the policy. General Smuts has returned to South Africa, but the C.I.G.S. and General Alexander share my conviction that this separation is desirable at the present time. . . .

Preparations for the Prime Minister's onward journey to Moscow were now intensive. He wanted, however, to leave no loose ends behind him in Cairo. During the day he wrote another formal letter to Auchinleck:

On my return journey I propose to hold a conference at Baghdad on the 14th or 15th in order to discuss *inter alia* the machinery of an independent Command for Iraq and Persia. By that time I shall have received the report now being prepared here by the Minister of State with the assistance of the Joint Staffs. I shall also have received from London the observations of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

By then I should like to know whether you feel able to undertake the very difficult and serious task which I proposed to you. If, as I hope will be the case, you feel whole-heartedly that you can take your station in the line I hope you will meet me in Baghdad, providing of course that the transference of command has been effected here. General Wavell will be there; Peirse<sup>1</sup> is coming from India and the Minister of State from Cairo, together perhaps with some other officers from both directions.

That evening Churchill had a conference with Brooke and Wavell about 'the new Iraqi-Persia Command and its possible inclusion in India Command'.<sup>2</sup> He also saw Alexander, and the final arrangements for the transfer of command were drafted.

<sup>1</sup> Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, A.O.C.-in-C. in India, 1942-3.

<sup>2</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 453.

*Prime Minister to General Ismay, for those concerned 10 August 1942*

You should announce at once that General Gott has been killed in action.

On the 8th I informed General Auchinleck by letter of the decision which had been reached, and yesterday, the 9th, he visited me here. The transfer of responsibility will be effected in three days from the 9th unless General Alexander asks for a few more days, which is unlikely. Alexander will inform you when the transfer is complete, and thereupon you should make an announcement in the following form:

(a) General Alexander has assumed command of His Majesty's forces in the Middle East, in succession to General Auchinleck.

(b) General Montgomery has been appointed to command the Eighth Army, in succession to General Ritchie.

(c) General McCreery has been appointed Chief of Staff to General Alexander.

(d) General Lumsden, who has recovered from his wound, has been appointed to the command of 30th Corps, *vice* General Gott, killed in action.

While strict secrecy must be observed till General Alexander's report that he has taken over is received, it would seem desirable that the Minister of Information should explain to the newspaper proprietors and/or editors in confidence beforehand what is intended, and impress upon them the importance of giving the Army of the Western Desert the utmost stimulus from these drastic changes in the High Command. Similar action will be taken here by the Minister of State. . . .

Early on the morning of August 11 the Prime Minister and his entourage set off for Teheran and Moscow. Before they left, however, it was agreed that the transfer of command between Auchinleck and Alexander should be made on August 15. In all the sorry tangle, this at least was seemly and honourable. The friendship and the trust which existed between these two were as firm as they had always been and were to remain for the rest of their lives. But about the rest of these transactions there was a sour stench.

It is not to be disputed that a change of command was desirable. Auchinleck himself had proposed it to the C.I.G.S. on June 23. He had then gone on to create victory out of imminent and total defeat; but for this neither at the time nor later did he seek or receive credit. Granted, however, that the change of command was as necessary in August as Auchinleck himself thought it to be in June; granted that Alexander (whose name he himself suggested to the C.I.G.S.) proved



to be the right, and victorious, successor; granted even that it was important that the Army of the Western Desert should be given 'the utmost stimulus from these drastic changes in the High Command'; was it necessary, in books written years afterwards, to smear Auchinleck's name and the names of several of his subordinates, and to belittle the achievements of the Army which he led? It was not the Cairo purge which was, of itself, wrong: it was the manner in which it was executed, and the steps subsequently taken to justify it. To dismiss an officer of Auchinleck's calibre and renown was an action that demanded from Churchill every ounce not only of courage but of skill in human relations and single-minded integrity which he possessed. Brave as he was, adroitly as he could move, Churchill, because he funked the deed, slurred it over and bungled it. The offer to Auchinleck of a truncated Persia-Iraq Command was, at best, a clumsy device for softening the blow; at worst—was he so wrong to believe, in the face of Ian Jacob's sincere and vehement arguments to the contrary, that the offer had been made in the certainty that he would refuse?

De Guingand, on the night that he heard the news of Auchinleck's dismissal, and aware of an interesting political analogy,<sup>1</sup> advised him to accept the offer. In Cairo Dorman-Smith, a few days later, still unaware of his own harsh fate, advised him to refuse. Auchinleck gave his D.C.G.S. a shrewd and thoughtful glance.

'Would your advice have been the same,' he asked, 'if I'd told you that, if I decided to accept the offer, I'd take you with me as C.G.S.?'

But there was in fact no likelihood that Auchinleck would accept this paltry and rather grimy sop. In a letter to the C.I.G.S. he set out, not his personal reasons for declining the offer, but the grounds of strategy and high policy on which he based his belief that the Command, as devised, would be a faulty structure, and that the scheme of which it was part would prove to be unworkable in practice and likely to break down under the stress of operations. Loftily patriotic in its motives and lucid in its arguments, this, like the appreciation which immediately preceded it in the twenty-two appendixes in Auchinleck's despatch, was a document of great historical significance.

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<sup>1</sup> The check in Hore-Belisha's career was, to all intents and purposes, final; Auchinleck, who never thought in terms of personal advantage, went on to new achievements, new griefs and new fame.

A combination of factors had brought Auchinleck to this sombre strait. He was even more alone at the end of his tenure of command in the Middle East than he was at the beginning. Several of the men whom he had chosen for high posts had not matched their conduct to his expectations; and they were gone. Those who had served him faithfully and loyally, to the utmost of their capacity, were to be harshly punished for that service. As Commander-in-Chief he had to bear—and did not flinch from bearing—the responsibility for the sins, both of commission and of omission, of his subordinates. But when loyalty was penalized and disloyalty openly and eagerly rewarded, it took a special type of courage to remain loyal. Those endowed with this special type of courage in the higher echelons of the Middle East Command in 1942 were not numerous.

Neither by birth nor upbringing did he belong to—and he had never acquired connexions with—the inner, ruling-class circles which still exercised a predominant influence in the British Army. He had risen to high command unassisted by wealth, privilege or social background. This would have been forgiven him and he would have been acceptable to the 'establishment' if he had conformed; but composedly and courteously he refused to conform. The Commander-in-Chief who so disliked the intellectual and social climate of Cairo that he built himself a small cottage in the Desert near Mena as a personal retreat, and who proposed to move G.H.Q. out of the city and put it in tents alongside the Pyramids, was hardly likely to be popular in the conventional swirl of cocktail parties, Gezira, the Turf Club and the long bar at Shepherd's. He was highly educated in his profession, quick-thinking and unorthodox. His overthrow was a victory for the orthodox, the conventional and the conformists.

Perversely, Auchinleck's gravest fault in the eyes of his enemies was that he had stemmed Rommel's advance and won the first battle of El Alamein. Had he not done this, had he been defeated at the gates of Egypt, his offence would not have been nearly as great; the dreary catalogue of reverses and retreats, tactical follies and ham-fisted generalship which he on 1-2 July 1942 brought to an abrupt stop, would have been enveloped in a far greater disaster out of which one more myth could have been evolved—another Dunkirk or another Singapore.

This was the rot that he stopped. Those who had caused it could not forgive him for showing to them—even if only briefly—their own smallness and shabbiness. They therefore created the legend that the rot had not been stopped; and, to give it an especially squalid plausibility, they inferred that the Commander-in-Chief had himself

abandoned all hope of beating Rommel and was bent on nothing more than further and precipitate withdrawal. Before they went to Moscow it was perfectly easy for both Churchill and the C.I.G.S. to see that this ugly story was quite without foundation. Auchinleck might have lost the Prime Minister's confidence; he might, in August 1942 as in 1941, be resolute in refusing to launch an offensive before his Army was reinforced, regrouped, re-equipped and properly trained. But how, between 3 August and 10 August 1942, was it not perfectly apparent to Churchill and his advisers that Auchinleck's policy, both as Commander-in-Chief, Middle East and as commander of Eighth Army, was that laid down in the appreciation of July 27? Since this was the precise policy followed by Auchinleck's successors in both appointments, it could hardly be condemned as lacking in offensive spirit.

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However, on August 12 there arrived in Cairo the new commander Designate of Eighth Army, Lieutenant-General B. A. Montgomery, whose assumption of this appointment, as had been agreed before Churchill's departure, was, like Alexander's, to date from August 15.

On the morning of his arrival he had an interview in G.H.Q. with Auchinleck. No contemporary note exists of their conversation; the recollections of the two officers are so directly opposed as to make any reasonable reconstruction of it impossible.<sup>1</sup> Five days earlier, before he knew of his own supersession, Auchinleck had agreed with Brooke that Montgomery was by far the most suitable commander for Eighth Army. This was a settled matter so far as he was concerned. His own attention was now concentrated on the grave problems of the new Command which the Prime Minister had offered him, and on the issue of his acceptance or rejection of that offer. He suggested that Montgomery, who had not served in the Western Desert before, should—in the three days before he was due

<sup>1</sup> In 1958, during the serial publication of Lord Montgomery's *Memoirs*, Sir Claude Auchinleck wrote to the *Sunday Times*, citing Montgomery's version as 'one instance in which his memory has allowed him to make a statement which is not true'. 'It is incorrect and absurd,' he continued, 'to say that, at that time, I was contemplating a withdrawal from the Alamein position. Such a plan had ceased to be seriously considered since early in July 1942, when Rommel had been forced back on the defensive and the Eighth Army had regained the power to attack.' No reply was ever offered to this direct challenge.

to take over—go up to Eighth Army and get the feel of his responsibilities and his opportunities. Montgomery accepted the suggestion.

At 11.00 hours on the following day, August 13, Montgomery—having been met by de Guingand on the road outside Cairo—arrived at Eighth Army Headquarters. At 14.00 hours he sent a signal to G.H.Q. announcing that he was seizing command of the Army forthwith.

Six days later, on August 19, the Prime Minister and the C.I.G.S., having returned from Moscow, paid a two-day visit to the forward areas in Montgomery's company. On the first night of their stay the new commander of Eighth Army entranced his guests with a performance which Brooke described as 'one of the highlights' of Montgomery's military career.

Brooke's account of Montgomery's *tour de force* was vivid:

... He knew that Rommel was expected to attack by a certain date. He showed us the alternatives open to Rommel and the measures he was taking to meet these eventualities. He said he considered the first alternative the most likely one, namely, a penetration of his southern front with a turn northwards into the centre of his position. He explained how he would break up this attack with his artillery, and would reserve his armour to finish off the attack after the artillery had rough-handled it. His armour would then drive Rommel back to his present front and no farther. He would then continue with his preparations for his own offensive which were already started. He would attack on the northern part of his front. It would mean hard fighting and would take him some seven days to break through, and he would then launch his Armoured Corps (his *Corps de Chasse*, as he called it) which he had already formed.<sup>1</sup>

Brooke was, he added, 'dumbfounded by the rapidity with which he had grasped the situation facing him, the ability with which he had grasped the essentials, the clarity of his plans ...'.

The C.I.G.S.'s amazement might have been qualified with respect for the administrative and structural strength and continuity of normal British Army staff procedure had he realized that Montgomery's confident exposition of the situation and his plans to meet it differed in no essential detail from the appreciation of July 27, prepared by Dorman-Smith and approved, readily and willingly, by Auchinleck—Rommel's attack, the measures to deal with it in

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 478.

a vigorous defensive battle, the refusal to interrupt the plans for a major British offensive and the intention to break through the Alamein positions.<sup>1</sup>

When he returned to Cairo, Churchill telegraphed a report back to London.

*Prime Minister to Deputy Prime Minister, for War Cabinet, General Ismay and others concerned* 21 August 1942

Have just spent two days in the Western Desert visiting H.Q. Eighth Army. Brooke, Alexander, Montgomery and I went round together, seeing 44th Division, 7th Armoured Division, and 22nd Armoured Brigade, and representatives of the New Zealand Division. I saw a great number of men and all the principal commanders in the 30th Corps area, also again Air Marshal Coningham, who shares headquarters with General Montgomery.

I am sure we were heading for disaster under the former régime. The Army was reduced to bits and pieces and oppressed by a sense of bafflement and uncertainty. Apparently it was intended in face of heavy attack to retire eastwards to the Delta. Many were looking over their shoulders to make sure of their seat in the lorry, and no plain plan of battle or dominating will-power had reached the units.

So serious did this appear that General Montgomery insisted on taking command of the Eighth Army as soon as he had visited the Front, and by Alexander's decision the whole command in the Middle East was transferred on the 13th.

Since then, from what I could see myself of the troops and hear from their commanders, a complete change of atmosphere has taken place. Alexander ordered Montgomery to prepare to take the offensive and meanwhile to hold all positions, and Montgomery issued an invigorating directive to his commanders, of which I will circulate the text on my return. The highest alacrity and activity prevails. . . .

About this disagreeable, inaccurate and offensive document the less said the better. The conditions in Eighth Army which it described ceased within a few hours of Auchinleck's taking command on June 25; there was no intention to retreat eastwards into the Delta in face of heavy attack—the valiant living and the valiant dead of all the battles of the forgotten month of July were there to show how unworthy was that accusation—and, having inflicted his biggest, most decisive defeat on Rommel, Auchinleck handed over command in the Middle East to Alexander not on August 13 but on

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I, para. 18, pp. 944-5.

August 15, as was clearly stated in the despatches of both commanders.

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The ritual smearing of the scapegoat had begun with gusto, if not with decorum. There were others, however, who even then knew the truth and were not afraid to put it on paper.

*Lieutenant-General Corbett to General Auchinleck* 14 August 1942

I want you to know that I am exceedingly proud of having had the privilege of serving you in war as your principal staff officer. The short time I have been with you has been full of constructive work, the fruits of which are yet to be seen.

You have been laying foundations which one day will prove their soundness. I know that you retain the implicit confidence of the troops you have been commanding. When the story of the battles that started on May 25 is told, it will, I know, enhance both your prestige and your reputation as a soldier.

Your achievement in stopping the rot in a beaten army, in restoring its morale so speedily, in wresting the initiative from a triumphant enemy, and inflicting on him crippling losses, will one day be recognized. . . .

You of all the Commanders-in-Chief who have so far led our Armies are the only one who has defeated the Germans in the field. . . .

*Lieutenant-General Zajac, C.-in-C. Polish Forces, Middle East, to General Auchinleck* 19 August 1942

It is with deep regret that I learn of your leaving the post of Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces which you have been holding during long months of the most difficult period.

Whilst at the post of the Commander of all Allied Forces in the Middle East you have shown profound understanding for Polish troops as well as great heart to me and also to my subordinate commanding officers and men.

Allow me, Sir, to take this opportunity to assure you that I have always shared the admiration for your courageous decision of voluntary withdrawal to El Alamein line. This daring decision, in my opinion, not only enabled to check Rommel's offensive but also dismissed menacing danger to the Nile Valley.

May I express once more my sincere regret to see you leaving us, and allow me, Sir, to assure you that Polish troops will always

remember the period during which they had the honour to be led by such an experienced Commander, Soldier and Friend.

*Major-General Morshead to General Auchinleck* 13 August 1942

I am very sorry and very surprised that you are going away, and every single member of the A.E.F. will be as regretful as I am, for we all hold you in the highest regard.

You have always been particularly kind and generous to me, and I shall always remember with gratitude your consideration and encouragement both while in Tobruk and ever since, and your having me to stay with you on several occasions.

I hope that your new appointment will be worthy of you. Whatever and wherever it is I should be not merely content but very privileged to serve under you.

'I looks towards you' Sir, and wish you all you wish yourself.

*General Catroux to General Auchinleck* 21 August 1942

At the moment when our collaboration is coming to an end I wish to thank you warmly for the confidence you have placed in me and for the favour you did to our troops in allowing them to take part in the battle in Libya. The Free French Forces are proud to have fought under your orders and will always feel deep gratitude towards you. As for myself I regret extremely seeing you leave and assure you of my deep respect both as a man and as a Commander.

*Major-General Galloway to General Auchinleck* War Office

31 August 1942

... I hope you are enjoying a well-earned rest and that it will not be long before you are again on the war-path; for any war-path without you on it is quite unthinkable to me.

I have seen Neil who has been in London and has gone away again. He is, up to the moment, still unemployed, so far as I know. He talked to me at some length about his battles but it was too close to the event, so far as he was concerned, for me to get very much out of him. It was rather like talking to a bull immediately after a bull-fight, if one could do such a thing, or asking a boxer in his dressing-room who had just been rather badly mauled, what he thought of boxing generally. One is apt on these occasions to get blood on one's clothes. I have also had one or two letters from abroad and I have seen some astonishing communications from one or two people. The result is all very confusing but it seems that with the new régime we will now have a new organization in

which the Royal Armoured Corps will predominate and your attempts to get that august body fighting as part of an army have, I am afraid, come to a standstill. . . .

I go home at night dead-tired with vexation because a third of every day is spent in the building fighting battles which are not against the Axis powers and I cannot see that it is necessary. We have a hundred examples of the bad effects upon military conception of operations and upon their carrying out by political influence, wangling, ogling, jockeying and the like and yet every time that any military operation takes place it still suffers from the same thing, and as long as we go on as we do now we shall continue so to suffer. It is a very great tragedy for it has cost the lives of thousands of men, prolonged the last two wars by at least two years and has lost us, and will continue to lose us, numbers of our best officers. It is pathetic to think that in peace time the Army struggles along stung in every way so that even its thought is affected and this all due to political misconceptions and vote-catching on an enormous scale, while when the war breaks out the Army has to stand the hardest knocks as the result, until, indeed, it is a wonder that it survives at all; and when everything does not go perfectly it is the subject of severe criticism from high-ups and even ridiculed by the man in the street. . . .

Among the politicians too there was one who was not a fair-weather friend.

*Secretary of State for India to General Auchinleck 2 September 1942*

I need not tell you how deeply distressed I was to hear of your supersession. I am in no position to judge of the merits of that decision in the particular circumstances of the moment: all I would say to you is, don't for one minute look upon your star as set. Take your present spell of rest whole-heartedly as rest and as recuperation for the next chapter, which may very well be as important as any in your life. I know, from my talks with them, that both the Prime Minister and Brooke are really well-disposed towards you and in no sense regard you as out of the picture for the rest of the war. So be of good heart, keep fit, and above all don't lose confidence in yourself or your power to do big things.

Don't bother to answer this. You are on holiday and the less you think about the past and the more you get ready for the future, whatever it may be, the better.



## AUCHINLECK

Auchinleck, having handed over to Alexander, stayed with the Caseys and then for a day or two at the Mena House Hotel. Then he flew back to India. In the same aircraft was Pete Rees, whom in June, at Gott's insistence, he had relieved of the command of 10th Indian Division. Now they were two officers of the Indian Army who had been 'stellenbosched'. The career of neither, however, was at an end.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### Home to India

INDIA, perhaps more deeply even than he was aware, was Auchinleck's home. His services to India—and to the Empire and Commonwealth of which India was a part—were not at an end in August 1942. For ten months thereafter, however, he was without active employment. India made this period bearable.

He needed all the resources he had, spiritual as well as physical. Even his stamina and powers of resistance, impressive as they were, had been tried to the limit. He was in need of rest and peace, and India—more seriously endangered by the threat of foreign invasion than she had been for two centuries—could still in 1943-4 supply both these in abundance.

He flew in an R.A.F. aircraft to Rawalpindi and thence to join his wife at Nathia Gali, the summer headquarters of the Government of the North-West Frontier Province. They were the guests of the Governor and his wife, Sir George and Lady Cunningham. From Nathia Gali, eight thousand feet above sea level, with its lawns, spreading deodars and the distant prospect of the great snow-covered mountains of Kashmir, they went in September to Kashmir itself. With the Cunninghams they went into camp and fished. Kashmir in those days was not an intractable international problem, but the happiest and most beautiful of all holiday grounds.

In mid-October—eight days before Montgomery launched his offensive at El Alamein—Auchinleck had a letter from Ismay, written in London on September 23:<sup>1</sup>

I intended to write to you directly the P.M. returned from his trip to Russia and the Middle East; but no sooner had he done so than I had a temporary break-down. I am now back at work, with batteries completely re-charged.

<sup>1</sup> On this same day Churchill, almost as impatient with Alexander as he had been with Auchinleck, signalled the C.-in-C., Middle East: 'We are in your hands and of course a victorious battle makes amends for much delay. . . .' (Winston S. Churchill, *op. cit.* Vol. IV, p. 527.)

I cannot tell you, old friend, how much I have had you in my thoughts lately, first in those nightmare days around our mutual birthday, and then again for the last two months: and I am more disappointed than I can say that things have gone badly for you. You deserved victory, if anyone did, and you were so near it more than once; and I was dumbfounded when the telegram suggesting a new set-up in the Middle East arrived—dumbfounded and very sad.

I cannot bear to think of your disappointment, and I only wish that I could come straight out to you, and tell you in all sincerity and truth that your stock is extremely high in this country, that the general feeling is one of gratitude to you for your achievements in the past, and of confidence in you for the future. Everybody—or nearly everybody—hopes and believes that a few weeks at most will find you in some highly important and responsible military appointment. It is unthinkable that your great qualities and experience should not be used in the greatest crisis which has ever confronted the British race. For myself I pray that we may soon see your sword flashing again in the struggle.

On November 9, when the Axis forces in the Western Desert were in full retreat, Amery wrote to him:

I know what you must be feeling just now. You always have the satisfaction of knowing that the victory of today was only made possible—and indeed the whole Middle Eastern situation saved—by your getting back to Alamein and holding the position there by your personal intervention. There would have been no champagne today if you hadn't put the cork in the bottle in July. So possess your soul in patience.

At the beginning of the cold weather Auchinleck went back to Delhi and worked for three months on his despatch. A laborious enough task was complicated by continuous correspondence with London, continuous suggestions of passages to be omitted or altered to meet the wishes of the R.A.F., or the Foreign Office, or Dominion Governments. But through the trimming and the tailoring a major part of the truth, as it was known at the time, emerged, and this sober, factual document stood the test of time a good deal better than many more highly coloured narratives.

In the high policy and strategy of the war, India had ceased to be a backwater. Both in Burma and in the Indian Ocean the Japanese had extended themselves to the utmost, but their forces stood at the

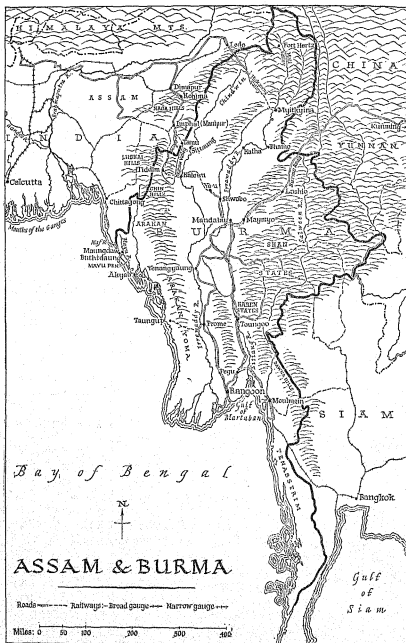
threshold to India, on the Assam-Burma border; and had they been able to move on there was little enough to stop them. Along the Assam frontier, across which had come the remnants of Burma Army and a forlorn tide of civilian refugees, there was at the time of the 1942 monsoon the thinnest possible defensive fringe—reduced for some weeks to a single effective battalion. The internal political situation was seething, but the lid had been clamped firmly down upon the pot. Sir Stafford Cripps's Mission, on which high hopes had been set, had proved abortive. All the leading political figures in Congress, including Nehru, were in gaol; Gandhi himself was under house-arrest in the Aga Khan's palace at Poona. Lord Linlithgow, thin and gaunt, stooping from his great height, was nearing the end of his long term as Viceroy. Wavell, battered but unbroken by all the year's vicissitudes, was Commander-in-Chief. The expansion of the Indian armed forces, in whose planning Auchinleck had played so notable a part, was proceeding steadily. Indian divisions in the Middle East, under Alexander as under Auchinleck, continued to distinguish themselves.

Where in all this was there a place for Auchinleck? To be idle at such a time in such a setting was an ordeal which it took a great deal of fortitude to endure. When the hot weather came the Auchinlecks went to stay at Mussoorie as guests of the Nawab of Rampur. Life was extremely easy and agreeable, but Auchinleck was beginning to chafe: was he ever to find employment again? In April he wrote to his friend, Leopold Amery.<sup>1</sup> Communications between India and the United Kingdom were slow and hazardous; in the matter of Service mail Wavell was prodding lethargic departments with a Churchillian relentlessness; but Auchinleck waited with more than ordinary eagerness for an answer.

At the end of April Field-Marshal Wavell<sup>2</sup> was summoned to London. The high strategy of the war was now under Anglo-American direction; and as the weight and magnitude of the American contribution, in equipment and manpower alike, increased, so the Americans' authority in the counsels of the Alliance and in joint planning grew stronger. To the British the defence of India had been vital, but the Americans regarded India very differently: on the perimeter of the vast area of Japanese conquest it was, in their view, one of several countries which might be bases from which to launch the counter-attack in Eastern Asia. They had no tender regard for the susceptibilities of British imperialism; President Roosevelt himself, indeed, was suspicious to the point of

<sup>1</sup> There is no copy of this letter in the Auchinleck papers.

<sup>2</sup> Wavell's promotion to Field-Marshal was gazetted on 1 January 1943.



hostility on this issue. The very mention of India's name had, for the British, a multitude of associations, symbolical and sentimental as much as practical. The Americans talked brusquely of 'the China-Burma-India theatre'. Their stand-point was one of cold, vigilant, businesslike and rather naïve detachment; but above all they were concerned with the sub-continent's strategic and logistical utility. By contrast the British were confused, perplexed and emotional. They knew India, however, and the Americans did not; and for the time being they ruled India.

At the turn of the year Wavell had launched a small reconnaissance in force against the Japanese in the Arakan peninsula in the extreme north-west of Burma. The operation went badly; in February the Japanese counter-attacked with considerable success. The news of stalemate dwindling to defeat and retreat on this Front contrasted with the spectacular advances and victories in North Africa, and aroused in London all the old suspicion and contempt for the capacity either of the Government of India or of the Indian Army to conduct any external military operation. Unjust as this attitude was, it influenced all strategic planning. The Americans, ignorant of the niceties of difference between the British Army and the British-led Indian Army, were disdainful of the whole of their ally's effort in this theatre of war. But on both sides of the Atlantic it was reluctantly and a little resentfully recognized that, however many political and military problems she posed, India was henceforth to play an important part in the war in East and South-East Asia.

In view of the intricate constitutional relationship, on both the political and the military planes, subsisting between the Government of the United Kingdom and the Government of India; in view of Churchill's extremely ambivalent attitude towards all Indian matters; and in view of American eagerness to prosecute the war with all vigour in this theatre, how was India's part in the war to be developed, and who was to supervise and develop it?

In so far as it was possible to allocate blame at all, the catastrophes in Malaya and Burma in the earlier part of 1942 were the responsibility of the United Kingdom, of the War Cabinet and of the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. They, not India, had exercised operational control; theirs the strategy and theirs the bitter fruits of that strategy. But as the fighting formations began the long, painful retreat from Burma in February 1942, operational responsibility for Burma was, as General Sir Alan Hartley, Wavell's Deputy Commander-in-Chief, observed, 'chucked back at India like a wet hen'. Now that there was a chance of the hen, dried and with feathers preened, being restored to strategic significance, the high-level

planners began to think of taking her out of India's lap. India was unlikely to be trusted with so valuable a fowl.

Such was the politico-military background of the conclave to which Wavell and the Naval and Air commanders in India, Admiral Somerville and Air Chief Marshal Peirse, were bidden. After preliminary consultations in London they joined the massive entourage which gathered round the Prime Minister for the second—Casablanca in January had been the first—of the great inter-Allied conferences of 1943. It was to be held in Washington. Churchill found the code-name for it: Operation 'Trident'. Because he himself had only lately recovered from pneumonia, his doctors refused to allow him to fly to the United States. The party travelled in the *Queen Mary*; the incidents of the voyage have been vividly described by Churchill and by Alan Brooke. Its effect on Auchinleck's career was important. For the personal background of 'Trident' was no less significant than the strategic.

Churchill had never regained his confidence in or liking for Wavell. The Americans misunderstood Wavell and, on the whole disliked him. Yet as Commander-in-Chief in India, Wavell was the linch-pin of any plan likely to be advanced for an offensive against the Japanese which would have India as its base and starting-point. In April, while preparations were being made in London for 'Trident', Amery, as fertile of ideas as he was far-sighted, sent a memorandum to Churchill. The time had come, he suggested

... for the appointment of a Commander-in-Chief for South-East Asia, in supreme command of all Allied forces from ... India, eastwards up to whatever may be the eventual junction with MacArthur's advance from Australia north-westwards.

For this purpose he proposed that the powers which had been granted to Wavell in the first, short-lived Allied Command in the Far East<sup>1</sup> should be resuscitated 'in a possibly more limited form'. As Secretary of State for India Amery urged that 'the case for the separation of the planning and direction of the South-East Asia campaign from the Indian Command holds good'.<sup>2</sup>

Amery also discussed the matter with the C.I.G.S.

A short while before we left London Amery had sent for me to

<sup>1</sup> First known as the South-West Pacific Command, later as the A.B.D.A. (American-British-Dutch-Australian) Command.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy*, Vol. V, by John Ehrman, p. 139.

discuss this question of Command of India. While the operations in Burma and Assam were connected with the immediate defence of India it was right that the Commander-in-Chief India should be in command of these operations. The problem had now changed and we were engaged in operations for the liberation of Burma, support of Chinese and defeat of Japanese. It was therefore now necessary to look upon India as the base of these operations under its own Commander-in-Chief, and to appoint a new Commander-in-Chief.<sup>1</sup>

Amery can be acquitted of any kind of prejudice against India Command or against Wavell himself; indeed, his bias was all the other way. His arguments were soundly based on considerations of logistics and administration. But they coincided with the Prime Minister's intuitions and sentiments, reinforced as these were by his distrust of Wavell and his resentment at another reverse in the Arakan.

Wavell, therefore, had an unhappy time in his stay in London and in his voyage in the *Queen Mary*. So galling in fact did he find Churchill's criticisms of the recent operations in Burma that he proposed to offer his resignation, and wrote a letter to that effect which Brooke dissuaded him from sending.

Churchill found sympathy and support in Washington where, he said:

... there was profound dissatisfaction, which we all shared, at the lack of vim in the recent operations in Burma. I considered re-modelling the Commands by making Wavell C.-in-C. in India, with Auchinleck as his deputy and one of the best younger corps commanders as C.-in-C. of the East Asian Front. I was sure changes of this character were indispensable if we were to treat the problems of this theatre with the gravity which they deserved.<sup>2</sup>

In Washington on May 21, when discussions with the Americans on strategy for Eastern Asia and the Pacific were nearing their climax, the Prime Minister asked his military advisers point-blank whether Wavell still had enough drive and energy to carry on with his job, and told them of his determination to make a change. Brooke noted in his diary:

He wishes to restrict the Commander-in-Chief in India to pure

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 623.

<sup>2</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. IV, p. 716.



command of India alone, and to divorce him from the operations outside India. The problem is complicated by the desirability of appointing a Supreme Commander to co-ordinate the activities of American and British in this theatre. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Brooke said afterwards that he thought that it was on May 21 that Churchill 'began to consider Wavell as a possible candidate for the Indian Viceroyalty which he was having serious difficulty in filling'.<sup>2</sup>

It took a month for this idea to be fulfilled. The Prime Minister and some of his entourage flew back to the United Kingdom by way of Algiers, to concert with Eisenhower and Alexander the first phase of the assault on Sicily and Italy. It was, therefore, not until Churchill was back in London that the complicated constitutional and administrative machinery needed to effect the change could be set in motion.

When Auchinleck went to the Middle East it had been clearly understood that, on the completion of his task there, he should return to the great post which he had vacated. This understanding had become somewhat blurred in high quarters in London. But neither the Viceroy nor the Secretary of State for India had forgotten it. Therefore in June, when Wavell was offered and accepted the Viceroyalty, Amery made the strongest representations to the Cabinet on Auchinleck's behalf. Wavell, he pointed out, could have no better successor as C.-in-C. than Auchinleck; indeed, there could and should be no other candidate. His recommendation was accepted by the Prime Minister, though not with any great show of enthusiasm. Henceforth, both as Prime Minister and as historian, Churchill continued to regard Auchinleck as an old-fashioned, orthodox soldier, rigidly limited in his ideas and inflexibly opposed to his—Churchill's—dynamic and constructive projects. Nothing could, in fact, be further from the truth: it was Churchill who was old-fashioned and Auchinleck who had the long, forward vision. However, there was no shaking Churchill from this misconception. If Auchinleck returned to his old post as C.-in-C. in India, he no more than Wavell would be permitted to have operational control of any attack on the Japanese in South-East Asia.

When in mid-June the ideas about the necessary changes in India had crystallized in the Cabinet, they were communicated to the Viceroy. Once again it was Gilbert Laithwaite's duty to inform Auchinleck of the appointment which it was desired he would assume. Decisions were required rapidly in order that the appo-

<sup>1</sup> *The Turn of the Tide* by Sir Arthur Bryant, p. 623.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 624.

appropriate announcements should be made as soon as possible, and uncertainties—Wavell had, after all, been inexplicably absent from his Command for two months—resolved. Auchinleck was staying with Rampur. With difficulty Laithwaite reached him by telephone, and in a guarded and not very satisfactory conversation bade the puzzled Auchinleck to an immediate parley. It was well past nightfall when Auchinleck reached Simla. Laithwaite gave him dinner alone and told him of London's offer. The Cabinet had set out their proposals in some detail and had couched them in courteous and conciliatory terms. Though the delay had been considerable, Ismay's hope that Auchinleck would once more assume a highly important and responsible military appointment was being fulfilled.

On the evening of 18 June 1943 an official statement from Number Ten Downing Street announced that Field-Marshal Wavell was to succeed the Marquess of Linlithgow as Viceroy of India and that General Sir Claude Auchinleck would assume the appointment of Commander-in-Chief in India at once.

'It is proposed,' the announcement continued, 'to relieve the Commander-in-Chief in India of the responsibility for the conduct of the operations against Japan, and to set up a separate East Asia Command for that purpose.'

Officially, Auchinleck took up his appointment on 20 June 1943. His first full day in the office was June 21, his fifty-ninth birthday. Exactly one year earlier Tobruk had fallen.

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*Secretary of State for India to General Auchinleck* 19 June 1943

You may well have wondered why I have never yet replied to your letter of April 18 which Peirse left for me on his way through—I am sorry to say I did not get an opportunity of seeing him. The simple reason was that the work which I hoped you would get—and have now got—while on the horizon, was still so uncertain and dependent on so many factors, that there was nothing that I could safely say. Now the matter has been decided I can most heartily congratulate you and look forward with the greatest confidence to the immensely important task which lies before you, and which no one is so qualified to fulfil as yourself.

For some time past I have been increasingly convinced that no man could really efficiently combine the preparation and conduct of operations in South-East Asia, which will increasingly, I hope, extend away from India's borders, and at the same time do full justice to the part which the Commander-in-Chief ought to play

both in keeping the Council<sup>1</sup> informed on all military issues, and also in perfecting the organization and tuning up the morale of the immensely enlarged army which India has accumulated in the last two years. The Prime Minister indeed has become seriously, possibly even excessively, alarmed at the prospect of the Indian Army losing morale or even being sapped by disloyalty, and feels that we should certainly call a halt to further expansion and possibly even consider some reduction below the present target. Well, on that you can advise as soon as you have had time to get the reins in your hands and possibly also to look round a bit.

That you will not yourself have the operational control of the South-East Asia operations should not be a disappointment to you. Even if for the time being much closer to you than were the operations in the Middle East before you yourself went there, the position is in essence the same and, as I said just now, one hopes that the South-East Asian campaign will move steadily away from India in the course of next year.

In your new Viceroy you will have someone who will fully understand your problems and I am sure give you all his confidence and support. Certainly your joint recommendations cannot fail to carry weight with the Cabinet here. His appointment is an interesting experiment, but he is a man of broad outlook and wide reading, and will I have no doubt rise to the height of his great responsibility.

The months during which you have been lying fallow should send you back to the task which you have at heart with fresh vigour and zest. I can only wish you all possible success.

*Sir Stafford Cripps to General Auchinleck*

20 June 1943

I am absolutely delighted. Please accept my very best wishes and convey them to the Sergeant.<sup>2</sup> Good luck and good health.

*General Arthur Smith<sup>3</sup> to General Auchinleck*

21 June 1943

I was highly delighted to see that you are to go back to your old post as C.-in-C. India, though I fear you will be disappointed that Burma is not included. I am sure you are thankful to be re-employed again, and I must add my congratulations to the many you must be receiving. My very best wishes to you.

<sup>1</sup> The Viceroy's Executive Council, on which the C.-in-C. held the post of War Member.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Auchinleck was a sergeant-driver in the W.A.C.(I.)—India's equivalent of the A.T.S.—driving staff cars in the G.H.Q. 'pool'.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. Smith was at this time G.O.C. London District.

Justice has not been done to you for what you did at Alamein. You did, in fact, save Egypt, as I constantly hear from those who served under you during those critical days. . . .

With these well-earned felicitations to encourage him, Auchinleck set about his task with his habitual zest. Until the new Command envisaged, not very precisely, in the Downing Street announcement was set up, Auchinleck was responsible both for any operations there might be on the Burma Front and for all operational planning in that theatre. His other responsibilities were far-reaching and many-sided. He was the Government of India's principal adviser and spokesman on all matters of defence and war policy. As such it was his duty to report from time to time to the Legislative Assembly and, if the need arose, to answer questions in the Assembly concerning the War Department. He was the Commander-in-Chief of all the armed forces in India, the Army and the R.A.F., the Royal Indian Navy and the Royal Indian Air Force, all of which had expanded hugely and were still expanding. The administrative and in the final resort the constitutional authority over the Indian forces overseas—in the Middle East and in Italy—was vested in him, although operationally they were, of course, under the command of the C.-in-C. in those theatres. To these numerous and manifold responsibilities there was, in the immediate future, to be added that of turning India into the base, supply, reinforcement and training area for the offensive operations which were to be launched in South-East Asia.

Auchinleck had to discharge these responsibilities in the face of persistent misunderstanding and misrepresentation not simply of himself but of the role of India in the war—the Government of India, the Indian armed forces and the people of India. In order to go on with a task for which he was so supremely well-fitted, he had to draw heavily on his generous resources of patience, forbearance and loyalty.

For four months, so far as operations in Burma were concerned, Auchinleck was a caretaker. Those months were far from idle. Eastern Army, with its Headquarters at Barrackpore, just outside Calcutta, was the operational formation. A new commander had been appointed on May 26, after the termination of the Arakan campaign. He was General Sir George Giffard, much of whose service had been spent in West Africa, whence he had just come. Giffard was a man of sterling quality, quiet, efficient and soldierly, and was soon on excellent terms with Auchinleck. He had under his command 4th Corps (Lieutenant-General Geoffrey Scoones) guarding the Assam-Burma border and the upper reaches of the Chindwin

River; 17th Indian Division to the south, in the Chin Hills, with a brigade holding Tiddim at the head of one of the main usable roads leading eastward into Burma; and farther south still, 26th Indian Division half-way down the Arakan peninsula and in contact with Japanese forces still stubbornly holding out in defence of Akyab—which had been the objective of the dry-weather attack. Two Divisions—14th and 39th Indian—had been withdrawn from the forward areas into India for conversion into training divisions, so that reinforcements reaching field formations could be fully trained in jungle warfare. The importance of the role of these two training divisions in ensuring a steady flow of trained formations to the battle area in the succeeding months cannot be too strongly emphasized. In this, as in many other respects, India Command was far in advance, in practice as well as in theory, of the United Kingdom; and in this, as in other fields, Indian achievements were only grudgingly recognized, if at all.

There were two main decisions taken at the 'Trident' conference which affected operations in this theatre. The first, as a result of American insistence that the Chinese must be sustained in their resistance against the Japanese, was that—by way of U.S. air bases in India and transport aircraft flying over the great mountain barrier dividing India and Burma from China—the air-lift to Chungking should be increased to ten thousand tons a month by the early autumn. The second was British-inspired and was intended to be a first step towards the liberation of Burma. It was that an offensive campaign was to be launched from Assam deep into northern Burma, and in conjunction there were to be amphibious operations along the Arakan coast and against Akyab.

Auchinleck was immediately faced, therefore, with two questions. First, could the single line of communication stretching from Bengal into Assam, with its strictly limited capacity, be made to support the Americo-Chinese air-lift as well as an offensive on land? Second, with the resources at India's disposal and any enlargement of them received from the United Kingdom or elsewhere, was there any reasonable chance of success in the amphibious operation which had been proposed?

He was back in the atmosphere of two years ago: he was being urged to do too much, too quickly, with inadequate resources. His reaction was just what it had been in the planning and preparatory stages of 'Crusader'. He surveyed in an orderly, disciplined and professional manner the task allotted to him, and calculated his minimum requirements to be able to perform it properly.

Throughout July and the first weeks of August a protracted and

rather stiffly worded argument went on between London and Delhi about the carrying capacity of the Assam line of communications, and the effect of its manifest inadequacy on the preparations for the proposed offensive into north-east Burma. The Chiefs of Staff were pained at the small tonnages which Auchinleck said could be transported to the forward areas. Auchinleck worked out that, given the maximum effort to increase facilities, there would still be a deficit in supplies for the forces alone of some six hundred tons a day for six months ahead. He suggested that, so far as land operations were concerned, Eastern Army should remain on the defensive, but that a continuous air offensive should be maintained against the Japanese in Burma, with Akyab as the primary target, combined with the supply lift to China and a conservation and preparation of India's resources for a major seaborne assault on Sumatra the following winter.

This assessment found no favour in London. The Chiefs of Staff said gloomily that if it were accepted it might prolong the war for years. They in their turn asked Auchinleck whether the capacity of the Bengal-Assam line of communication could be increased sufficiently to enable the original 'Trident' plan to be carried out, if substantial American assistance in the form of technical military personnel and material (locomotives, trucks, motor vehicles and barges) were provided, if priority over all other activities in India were given to the Assam communications, and if all transportation facilities east of the Brahmaputra were brought under military control.<sup>1</sup>

In reply, Auchinleck pointed out that, even if all these measures were adopted, there would still be, in March 1944, a deficiency of some 102,000 tons on the supplies required. If a major offensive were to be carried out in 1944-5, he told London quite plainly, the capacity of the Assam line of communication would have to be doubled, and the preparations for this should begin at once and take priority over short-term operations.

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There now intervened in eastern India two major calamities. The first was the Bengal famine; the second was a series of large-scale floods in Bengal and Orissa. India is a land in which major calamities occur with formidable frequency, some of whose causes are outside human control. This was not true of the Bengal famine,

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: The War against Japan*, Vol. II, by Maj.-Gen. S. Woodman Kirby, p. 397.

which was largely man-made. The war had cut India off from Burma, one of her main sources of supply of food, rice in particular. But rice was not a staple item of Bengal diet. There had been a perfectly adequate harvest of other food-grains in the Punjab and the other grain-growing regions of India. When stocks of these reached Calcutta and the densely populated area around this huge, sprawling city, they were hoarded by the merchants in warehouses, barns and go-downs, not in Calcutta itself but up-country in the countless towns and villages of the Ganges Delta. Military operations had, it was true, taken many of the country boats and barges ordinarily used for riverine transport in this district into eastern Bengal and Assam. This shortage of transport combined with the fear and avarice of the merchants and speculators, the absence of any efficient rationing and control, and the weakness and corruption of the provincial government, to bring about the catastrophe.

The real extent of the Bengal famine of 1943 was never assessed. It was estimated that more than a million people died. From the beginning of July onwards the starving dragged themselves in from the surrounding countryside and the teeming slum areas to the centre of Calcutta, where—since the provincial government instituted no system of relief—they rotted and died. They haunted the area around the main railway station at Howrah, they lay down on the pavements of the big, bustling streets of shops and hotels, they crawled up the stairs of blacked-out office buildings—to die. The provincial government's principal interest was to pretend that this was not happening at all. They concealed the facts as long as they could from the central Government, they withheld information and did their best to prevent the newspapers from getting it and publishing it themselves.

Had the hungry and the dying remained in their villages, the grisly drama might have been kept hidden; but it was exposed nakedly in the centre of the city. The leading English-language newspaper of north-eastern India, the *Statesman*, published a vivid and factually accurate series of articles, accompanied by comment and photographs. There were many foreign journalists in Calcutta, British, Australian and American war correspondents, idly awaiting the end of the monsoon and the renewal of the campaign. When they began to telegraph their own accounts of the mounting disaster to their newspapers, the Bengal Government, which had been unable to suppress the *Statesman*, decided to use military censorship to prevent the news from getting abroad. The word 'famine' possessed an exact, if sombre, meaning. The censors were instructed to change it in all outgoing Press messages to the phrase 'grave food shortage'.

Whatever it was called, they died of it. The stench of death and corruption lingered over the huge, moist, steamy city. The monsoon brought little relief or change, and particularly heavy rains in the hills at the end of July caused another catastrophe—a large-scale flood. Some fifty miles north-west of Calcutta the Damodar River burst its banks, swept over the Grand Trunk Road connecting Calcutta and its surrounding industrial area with western India, and destroyed large sections of the main East India Railway. A week later floods in southern Bengal and Orissa breached the line from Calcutta to Vizagapatam and southern India. The floods were painfully slow in subsiding. There was little chance to repair the breaches until October or early November, and normal running was not possible until early December. Meanwhile the tonnage of supplies reaching Calcutta was reduced by more than fifty per cent; this had an immediate effect on deliveries in eastern Bengal and Assam, and, therefore, on the efforts to implement the 'Trident' directive.

On August 10 a third blow was delivered. The Chiefs of Staff told Auchinleck that, in order to exploit a possible Italian collapse in the Middle East, they had authorized the retention by the Middle East of all the assault shipping allotted to India for the seaborne assault on Akyab. Yet in face of the difficulties of famine, flood, impoverishment of communications and their own refusal to send promised—and vitally necessary—equipment, they continued to press the Commander-in-Chief to prepare for an early offensive.

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To these problems and tribulations, which were far from negligible, there was added another: the Prime Minister's peremptory and irritably critical interest in the doings of India Command. This was greatly stimulated by his belated discovery of the one obvious success achieved by India Command in the campaigning season of 1943—the Chindit expedition which, under the command of Brigadier Orde Wingate, had penetrated deep into Japanese-occupied Burma, had done considerable damage to the enemy's communications, had inflicted a number of casualties and, for the best part of three months, had kept the equivalent of two divisions pinned down in the centre of the country. For their part in this considerable achievement G.H.Q. India and the India Command as a whole received not well-merited praise and congratulations, but abuse and jeers.

The operation had been planned and executed in Wavell's time, but, since it was Auchinleck's misfortune to bear the brunt of its



consequences on the plane of policy and strategy, it must be briefly studied.

Wingate was a Regular Royal Artillery officer of ability, intelligence, heterodox opinions, vast ambitions and ardent temperament, whose many admirable qualities were marred by a heavy streak of ruthlessness, intense egoism and a tendency to push his views to extremes. His previous career,<sup>1</sup> both before and during the war, had been stormy. It had made him enemies in high places, thereby exacerbating his rebelliousness; but it had also won him the strong, steady friendship and support of two influential and respected senior officers, Ironside and Wavell. During the 1936-9 Arab Rebellion in Palestine, he had organized 'special night squads' for the offensive defence of Jewish settlements. In 1940-1 he led a column into Italian-occupied Ethiopia which played a notable part in the defeat of the Italians and the re-establishment of Emperor Haile Selassie on his throne. In a phase of bitter dejection after this exploit, when he believed that his ideas were rejected and the results of his enterprise thrown away, he attempted to commit suicide. When he recovered not only from his self-inflicted physical injuries but from the severe nervous break-down of which they were the tormented expression, he was given markedly unsuitable employment in the United Kingdom. From this he was rescued by Wavell, who had him brought to India in 1942.

In fulfilment of Wingate's closely reasoned and eloquently expounded tactical theory of the Long Range Penetration Group, Wavell let him train and lead into Burma a brigade group, consisting of seven infantry columns, which operated there with varying fortunes from mid-February to early May 1943.

An essential condition of the operation, from start to finish, was as complete a preservation of secrecy as possible. In G.H.Q. and in headquarters of subordinate formations, only a limited number of officers had any knowledge of the expedition's existence, let alone of its progress. Three British war correspondents, under a pledge of secrecy, accompanied Wingate's H.Q. column as far as the west bank of the Chindwin on its way out; an official film was shot of the approach march and the crossing of the Chindwin; and an Indian Army observing officer—Captain Motilal Katju, M.C., who was a nephew of Jawaharlal Nehru—was attached to Wingate's H.Q. to report the course of the operation. Captain Katju was killed by a Japanese sniper in the last phase of the withdrawal, and all his notes, with the exception of a page of his diary, were lost. When the

<sup>1</sup> It is fully recorded in his biography, *Orde Wingate* by Christopher Sykes.

majority of the survivors had marched back into Assam early in May, it was decided by the Deputy Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Alan Hartley, that the story could now be told.

Wingate was flown to Delhi from Imphal. On May 21 a communiqué was issued, and the Director of Public Relations called a Press conference in G.H.Q. It was attended by more than two hundred journalists from India, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Commonwealth. Wingate delivered a long and memorable oration. He gave a vivid account of the operation itself, he expounded the tactical theories on which it was based, went on to give his views on world strategy, and answered questions incisively and candidly.

Set against the background of defeat and frustration in this whole theatre, and taken in conjunction with the recent reversal in the Arakan, the news of the exploits of 77th Brigade (the expedition's official title) was exciting and welcome. Wingate became world-famous—at any rate so far as the newspapers were concerned—overnight.

The impact of this fame on the higher strategic conduct of the war was considerable, but it was delayed by some two months. Wingate himself, at the time of and after the issue of the communiqué, was suffering from amœbic dysentery; this and the accumulated strain of many months of hardship, danger and heavy responsibility made him seriously ill. As soon as he was out of bed he wrote his own report—his despatch—on the operation, and had a number of copies of it printed without the sanction of higher authority. When it was almost ready for official publication it was seen in Delhi by the D.M.O. and the C.G.S. Both these officers, Major-General Mallaby (subsequently killed in action in Java) and General Sir Edwin Morris, had given as much support and help as they possibly could to the operation, and were, both in principle and on matters of detail, actively friendly to Wingate. Wingate's report, however, contained outspoken and severe strictures not only on G.H.Q. but on subordinate formations. On July 6 the C.G.S. ordered that its publication be suspended until it had been re-examined by the commanders and staffs of these formations. Wingate saw this as a malign manoeuvre against him by his enemies, and as a deliberate and perverse obstruction of the proper prosecution of the war.

In, as he believed, 'the interests of the King's service', Wingate sent one of his own privately printed copies to the Secretary of State for India, who was a powerful friend and ally and shared his passionate belief in the cause of the Zionists in Palestine. This reached Amery in mid-July; he promptly and properly passed it on to Churchill.

More than once, both before and during the war, Wingate had been brought to the Prime Minister's notice. Now Churchill received his Chindit report at the exact moment at which his current arguments with India Command were at their height. On its positive side the report excited Churchill's ardently romantic imagination and stimulated ideas of a whole huge campaign of long range penetration operations; on the negative side it fed and amply confirmed his inveterate suspicions of and hostility towards the Indian Army and India Command.

The consequences were highly melodramatic.

*Prime Minister to General Ismay, for C.O.S. Committee 24 July 1943*

See now how all these difficulties [in Burma] are mounting up, and what a vast expenditure of force is required for these trumpery gains. All the commanders on the spot seem to be competing with one another to magnify their demands and the obstacles they have to overcome.

2. All this shows how necessary it is to decide on a commander. I still consider he should be a determined and competent soldier, in the prime of life, and with the latest experience in the field. General Oliver Leese is, I believe, the right man, and as soon as the fighting in Sicily is over he should come back to this country for consultation. I consider Wingate should command the army against Burma. He is a man of genius and audacity, and has rightly been discerned by all eyes as a figure quite above the ordinary level. The expression 'the Clive of Burma' has already gained currency. There is no doubt that in the welter of inefficiency and lassitude which has characterized our operations on the Indian Front this man, his force and his achievements, stand out, and no mere question of seniority must obstruct the advance of real personalities to their proper stations in war. He too should come home for discussion at an early date.<sup>1</sup>

The signal summoning Wingate to London went out the following day. Wingate was at that time in Delhi, gloomy and discontented,

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. V, pp. 576-7. The phrase 'Clive of Burma' had been coined by the correspondent of the *Daily Mail*, Graham Stanford. The officer in charge of Press censorship, who in civilian life was himself a journalist, glanced at the words in Stanford's submitted copy, realized that he was there to censor for security and not for style, and passed it without comment. It occurred to him that it might achieve a certain notoriety, but not that it would detonate explosively if tardily in the Prime Minister's imagination.

convinced that his enemies were seeking still to frustrate him. It should perhaps be noted that G.H.Q., whose officers Wingate disliked and despised, who were being castigated by Churchill for 'inefficiency and lassitude', had—while 77th Brigade's operation was still in progress—ordered the formation and training of another brigade, the 111th, under the command of Brigadier (later Major-General) W. S. Lentaigne, for a similar operation, and that this brigade's training period was by now well advanced.

It was not until July 30 that Wingate left Delhi for London. But Churchill's enthusiasm for him and indignation against India Command could not be pent up.

*Prime Minister to General Ismay, for C.O.S. Committee 26 July 1943*

It is vital and urgent to appoint a young, competent soldier well trained in war, to become Supreme Commander [in the Burma theatre], and to re-examine the whole problem of the war on this Front so as to infuse vigour and audacity into the operations. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Wingate reached London on August 4. His immediate experiences thereafter are not of direct concern to this narrative, and have often been recorded. Accompanied by his wife, he joined the Prime Minister's entourage then setting out in the *Queen Mary* for the next great inter-Allied conference, known by the code-name 'Quadrant' and about to open in Quebec.

Among the main items on the agenda for 'Quadrant' was the establishment of South-East Asia Command, and the form which the strategic and tactical directions and intentions of this Command should take. Churchill had been engaged in correspondence with Roosevelt on these subjects. They had agreed that the Supreme Commander should be a British officer, and Churchill before he left London had decided (but had not told the Chiefs of Staff) that this officer was to be Rear-Admiral Lord Louis (later Admiral of the Fleet Earl) Mountbatten, at that time Chief of the Directorate of Combined Operations. Mountbatten, therefore, like Wingate, was a member of Churchill's party.

On the voyage in the *Queen Mary* and throughout the conference Wingate made the running so far as future operations in Burma were concerned. Not only was he in Churchill's eyes, quite justifiably, the hero of a remarkable exploit: he was the expert—and the only expert present—on fighting in Burma. No staff officer of G.H.Q. India, which was the Headquarters responsible for the planning of

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 577-8.

operations and their conduct until South-East Asia Command took over, had been invited; and none was sent for in the course of the discussions.

Wingate cannot be blamed for taking advantage of this curious—and from his point of view happy—absence of those whom he, sincerely but wrong-headedly, regarded as his implacable opponents. He was feverishly active and saw a great deal of the Prime Minister and the C.I.G.S. Since there was nobody with the experience, the contemporary knowledge and the authority to contest his assertions and his opinions, he had an astonishingly free hand.

But not only did Wingate's brain seethe with constructive military ideas, which his own experience had concentrated into the all-embracing 'master' theory of Long Range Penetration: he had a great many bees in his bonnet, and each bee carried its full load of critical sting. Barbed stings for India Command, luscious honey for the Prime Minister—it was a mischievous mixture.

On August 10, while the *Queen Mary* was still at sea, Wingate submitted a memorandum to the Chiefs of Staff on his proposals for the reoccupation of northern Burma in the dry season of 1943-4. His biographer says:

It was short and conclusive and contained no Biblical quotations. Of his many memoranda this was the most remarkable in immediate effect and ultimate result.<sup>1</sup>

Wingate envisaged the formation, so that operations should begin not later than 15 February 1944, of no fewer than eight L.R.P. Groups, each of eight columns, in addition to what he rather airily described as 'the main force' which was to hold Burma. The L.R.P. groups would be used both offensively and defensively. There would be an L.R.P. force headquarters, corresponding to a corps headquarters, and two 'wing' headquarters, corresponding to divisional headquarters. From the outset the commander of the whole L.R.P. force would be responsible for organization and training, under India Command, and when it became operational he would be responsible to Eastern Army. Since all the groups would be at all times maintained by air, the force would need at its disposal 'between twelve and twenty' D.C.3 aircraft. The force would total some 19,000 British officers and men, some 7,500 'Gurkhas or

<sup>1</sup> *Orde Wingate* by Christopher Sykes, p. 452.

Africans',<sup>1</sup> 60,000 mules and ponies, and 110 jeeps; of the officers, one thousand would be Army and ninety R.A.F. The total manpower alone—apart from any special demands for equipment which he might make—was equivalent to that of two full divisions.

Wingate admitted that even in the two small L.R.P. groups now in existence in India—77th Brigade reforming and 111th Brigade in training—there were too few officers or men of the quality he needed, and that there was a shortage of the indispensable experts, airmen, sappers and signalmen. These deficiencies, he asserted, could be overcome without delay if the necessary priority were given.

Meanwhile, Wingate was seeing the Prime Minister frequently. The pair of them discovered that their views on the Indian Army were gratifyingly alike. On August 11 the result of this conjunction of opinions was a telegram to the India Office containing what Leopold Amery described as 'a peremptory demand for cutting down the Indian Army'.

Amery's diary continued:

It was not quite clear whether Winston had read the full Minute I had sent him just before he left, based on Auchinleck's telegram, against doing more than reducing two divisions. I explained this to Attlee and he has sent a telegram to Linlithgow, telling him of Winston's telegram and asking if Auchinleck is really sure that no pruning of ancillary services or further reduction of fighting to training divisions was possible. . . .

The Chiefs of Staff accepted Wingate's audacious memorandum as it stood<sup>2</sup> and on August 14 addressed a telegram to Auchinleck which was in effect a recapitulation of the memorandum, and asked him what effect such a policy would have on his resources and on the operations already planned. Even before they heard Auchinleck's views, they instructed him (since they conceived that the value of L.R.P. groups in the Japanese war was now proved) to expand the two existing groups to the scale laid down by Wingate, to set up at once a force headquarters and one wing headquarters, and immediately to form a third complete group as the first stage of the expansion programme. In October, as the second stage, he was to

<sup>1</sup> Since Wingate specifically asked for Gurkhas, it is appropriate to quote the view of an Indian Army general, himself formerly a Gurkha officer, on Wingate's use of Gurkhas in his first expedition: 'He brought off what must be an all-time record in rotting out a Gurkha battalion, a young one withal. . . .'

<sup>2</sup> They did reduce the total of jeeps by ten.

form the second wing H.Q. and three more groups. By 1 January 1944 he must have completed the formation of the last two groups required to bring the total up to Wingate's proposed eight.

Again and again between 1940 and 1942 Auchinleck had been bidden by higher authority to achieve the impossible immediately with far too few men, under-trained and under-equipped. But hardly ever before had he been presented with a series of demands quite so unrelated to the realities of the situation. Neither he nor his staff possessed any deep-seated animosity towards Wingate. The belief that they did was one of his less agreeable, more irrational traits. But at just the time when Churchill was enthusing over his discovery of 'the Clive of Burma' and demanding his promotion to the rank of Army Commander, Auchinleck wrote to Brooke:

Wingate has exceptional power to organize and inspire personally officers and men engaged in these highly difficult independent operations . . . but the farther he is removed from personal contact with the troops employed, for example as corps commander, the less valuable he is likely to be.<sup>1</sup>

It took five days to marshal a reasoned and fully factual reply to the Chiefs' of Staff telegram. While this was being prepared in Delhi, in Quebec Wingate, on August 17, addressed a full meeting of the Combined (British and American) Chiefs of Staff. His role at 'Quadrant' was unique. He was, as his biographer has said, 'the point of agreement': Churchill beamed approval and glowed with romantic affection; to the British Chiefs of Staff, whose knowledge of the Indo-Burman scene could hardly be described as accurate or up-to-date, his proposals seemed a practicable way of achieving some results in Burma; to the Americans he offered convincing evidence (which they thought they had never seen before) of the desire to co-operate in the Far Eastern war, and of the capacity to do so in a way which they understood. He was at a considerable advantage, therefore, when he talked to the Combined Chiefs of Staff; his oratorical gifts consolidated this advantage, and he made a deep impression. However, had Auchinleck known that, in the course of his speech, Wingate chose to describe the Indian Army as 'that system of outdoor relief'—and was not rebuked for this outrageous impertinence—it is doubtful either that the reply to the Chiefs' of Staff telegram would have been 'moderate'<sup>2</sup> or that Auchinleck would ever have addressed another word to Wingate.

<sup>1</sup> *Orde Wingate* by Christopher Sykes, p. 457.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 455.

Auchinleck's telegram to the Chiefs of Staff was sent on August 19. It consisted of three sections. In the first section he considered the general tactical role of L.R.P. Groups. He said that they were not capable of achieving results against organized forces of all arms, for the task of the irregular was not to fight but to evade the enemy and harass him in guerilla warfare. If, therefore, what Wingate called 'the main forces' could not take advantage of the L.R.P. Groups' offensive operations, their efforts would be largely wasted and would leave behind, as victims of brutal Japanese retaliation, any Burmese who helped the columns. Auchinleck could not afford airily to dismiss the main forces: to him they were the dominant factor, and their needs and their role must take priority over those of the L.R.P. Groups.

In the second section he dealt with the administrative problems which Wingate's proposals raised. First there were the intractable difficulties of the Assam line of communication. Second, Wingate's air requirements, realistically assessed, were not 'twelve to twenty D.C.3s' but at least four squadrons, in advanced areas, whose supply and maintenance would add more to the load of the already overburdened line of communications. One of Wingate's suggestions, made as an obvious inducement to the Americans, was for a Chinese advance from Yunnan in association with one of his L.R.P. Groups. Auchinleck pointed out the unwisdom of relying on Chinese undertakings in matters of this sort.

In the third section he dealt with Wingate's manpower demands. To fulfil these, he said, would entail breaking up 70th (British) Division, 1st Indian Division, which was organized on an animal-and-motor-transport basis, and one other division, which he did not name, in order to provide three British battalions. Some three thousand British troops would have to be found from other arms and some six hundred signallers (in addition to eight signal officers and 140 other ranks, whom the C.I.G.S. had agreed to find); and there would have to be extensive 'milking' of every other unit in India to find suitable officers. These calculations were based, Auchinleck pointed out, on the assumption that one hundred per cent of those thus selected would be acceptable for L.R.P. purposes; this he thought unlikely, since experience had shown that some forty per cent of any given unit had to be rejected during training.

He said that he was firmly opposed to the creation of a special force headquarters, since he believed that there could only be one commander in each area of operations or corps front.

In conclusion he summed up the considerable consequences of Wingate's suggestions so far as the operations ordered after 'Trident'



were concerned. The Arakan operation would be impossible because there would be no 70th (British) Division; the extinction of 1st Indian Division would leave Eastern Army without a reserve, and the assault brigades needed for the campaign of 1944-5 would not be available.

Nevertheless Auchinleck saw considerable value in L.R.P. operations in Burma on a scale and according to administrative and logistical principles which he believed to be practicable. The 81st West African Division was due to arrive in India shortly; its organization was flexible, it had been trained in jungle warfare and it had porter transport. A brigade of this division, he suggested, together with 77th and 111th Brigades, each made up, if necessary, to eight columns, would be sufficient to meet the L.R.P. requirements for the campaigning season 1943-4. If further brigades were wanted, he suggested that, as soon as it was trained, the 82nd West African Division should be brought to India and converted to L.R.P. Groups.

The crucial period of the Quebec Conference lasted from Thursday, August 19 to Sunday, August 22. Many of the discussions were at cross-purposes; there were grave disagreements; there was an underlying sense of acerbity and strain, vividly conveyed in Brooke's diary. Its cause lay in the deeply divergent interests of those involved. They have been well summarized by an American historian:

In Eisenhower's Command, harmonious and whole-hearted co-operation was possible because British and American objectives could be summed up in one word—'Berlin'. In South-East Asia, on the other hand, the British and Americans were fighting two wars for different purposes, and the Kuomintang Government of China was fighting a third war for purposes largely its own.<sup>1</sup>

And the British official historian has commented:

These fundamentally divergent interests might have been pursued independently had either the geography or the supplies permitted. Unfortunately they did not.<sup>2</sup>

'Quadrant' was an attempt—in the ultimate result a successful attempt—to find a compromise which would resolve these differences. The advantage of Wingate's proposals was that they offered a way out of what appeared, to all those engaged in high-

<sup>1</sup> *The White House Papers of Harry L. Hopkins* by Robert E. Sherwood, Vol. II, p. 776.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Second World War Grand: Strategy*, Vol. V, by John Ehrman.

level strategic argument at Quebec, to be becoming a deadlock. This, however, was a situation of which Auchinleck had not been apprised. Therefore, when his telegram reached Quebec, its reception was singularly hostile. Wingate's biographer said: 'In a private talk with Wingate Mr. Churchill commented on it with some freedom.'<sup>1</sup>

The Chiefs of Staff asked Wingate for his observations on Auchinleck's views. Wingate, who now had, in the words of the Official History, 'power without responsibility',<sup>2</sup> stated categorically that if it were seriously intended to proceed with the expansion of L.R.P. forces, Auchinleck's views were quite unacceptable. He said that if the L.R.P. Groups were to be effective, they must consist in the main of British officers, N.C.O.s and O.R.s. He pointed out that the West Africans had never been tested in battle, and that it would be a mistake to let the whole plan depend on their success in an L.R.P. role. He would, however, consent to taking one West African brigade, on a strictly experimental basis, so long as he had a free hand in its organization and training, and provided that he were not asked to use any West Africans in his 1943-4 operations, and that he could base any further enlargement of the West African component in the 1944-5 campaign on the results, as he would assess them, of 1943-4.

To retain the conventional battalion and brigade organization, he said, would cut across his whole conception of Long Range Penetration Groups, which must be organized in columns. And an independent force H.Q. was essential, not only while the force was being organized and trained, but throughout the actual operations.

These arguments were embodied in two memoranda which Wingate submitted to the Chiefs of Staff. Christopher Sykes made certain direct quotations in order to convey an impression of Wingate's dialectical style. One quotation at least had a more than stylistic significance:

[General Auchinleck] finds himself unable to recommend the formation and training of more than the existing L.R.P.G.s. The grounds on which he bases this opinion are that the creation of any more L.R.P.G.s will denude the Army in India of essential forces. There are in India today, and have been for a considerable time, something in the neighbourhood of a million men under arms. . . .<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Orde Wingate* by Christopher Sykes, p. 460.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the Second World War: The War against Japan*, Vol. II, by Maj.-Gen. S. Woodman Kirby, p. 404.

<sup>3</sup> *Orde Wingate* by Christopher Sykes, p. 460.

This thesis of Wingate's gave Churchill a new whip with which to lash the Commander-in-Chief in India and the Indian Army. The use to which the Prime Minister put it, and the lengths to which he pursued his vendetta against the Indian Army, will shortly be seen. It was an ignorant thesis and it was recklessly exploited.

Auchinleck's telegram and Wingate's memoranda were considered by the Joint Planning Staff in Quebec. On August 23 they made their recommendations. They gave their full support to Wingate's proposal that eight L.R.P. Groups should be formed, but since some uncertainty continued to prevail over the possibility of a long-range assault on Sumatra, they recommended that for the time being the expansion should be limited to six groups. The consequent reorganization would mean, they pointed out, merely the break-up of 70th Division and the removal of one brigade from 81st West African Division. And they backed Wingate's demands for specialist personnel and for the establishment of his own headquarters. The Chiefs of Staff accepted these recommendations without debate, and instructions in accordance with them were immediately issued to Auchinleck.

Wingate's triumph was complete. Operationally, however, it ceased almost forthwith to have any significance, because on August 25 the establishment of South-East Asia Command was formally announced, and henceforth it was to this Headquarters that Wingate would be responsible in the sphere of operations. All that India Command had to do was to find the officers and men, supply the organization and training facilities, and acquire the equipment that Wingate would demand. His needs proved to be numerous and varied; and if they were not promptly fulfilled, all he had to do was to send a signal to the Prime Minister. When he returned to India it was to consolidate his victory in the most merciless manner. The pity of it was that this manner, and the suspicion and resentment which underlay it, made enemies out of those who wanted to be his friends. Auchinleck, however, was not of their number. He was as appreciative of Wingate's peculiar ability as he was loyal to his staff officers in the rancorous atmosphere of criticism in which, when Wingate was in the full tide of his power, they were forced to live.

\* \* \*

Operational control and responsibility for action against the Japanese in Burma and in South-Eastern Asia generally were finally removed from India Command, and from Auchinleck as C.-in-C., by the decision of the 'Quadrant' Conference. To assume

this control and this responsibility the Conference agreed to establish South-East Asia Command (S.E.A.C.). The objects and the organization of S.E.A.C. were defined in the Final Report of the Combined Chiefs of Staff (British and American), presented to their respective superiors on Tuesday, 24 August 1943. The report stated that:

... there would in future be separate Commands in India and in South-East Asia, that the latter would include Burma, Ceylon, Siam, the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, that the Viceroy of India would resolve any 'day-to-day' differences that might arise between the two Commands, and that the South-East Asia Command would be placed under a British Supreme Allied Commander, with an American Deputy, three Service Commanders-in-Chief, and a Principal Administrative Officer. All business between the Combined Chiefs of Staff and the Supreme Commander would pass through the British Chiefs of Staff, who 'would exercise jurisdiction over all matters pertaining to operations', while the Combined Chiefs of Staff retained 'a general jurisdiction over strategy' for the theatre, and over the allocation of American and British resources between it and the Chinese theatre.<sup>1</sup>

The Supreme Allied Commander appointed was, as Churchill had desired, Lord Louis Mountbatten; his Deputy was the American, General Joseph W. Stilwell, who had been active in this theatre of war from the outset, in his way as individualistic a character as Wingate, and famous for his outspoken, corncrake dislike of the British. The complicated internal arrangements of S.E.A.C. were set out in great detail, but the equally crucial matter of its relations with India Command was left as loose and vague as possible.

Mishandled, these relations could have done grave damage to the whole elaborate enterprise. From the outset, and throughout, often in circumstances of considerable difficulty, they were not mishandled. Their success was due to two men: Auchinleck and Mountbatten.

*Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to General Auchinleck*

2 September 1943

I cannot tell you how grateful I was for your most reassuring and welcome message. This overwhelming task had left me

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Second World War: Grand Strategy*, Vol. V, by John Ehrman, p. 135.

somewhat breathless and worried and your kind message did a great deal to reassure me.

Ever since I had the privilege of being a member of your Syndicate during the Higher Commanders' Course at Aldershot I have always had a great admiration for all you have done. I was so delighted when the decision was made at a Defence Committee to appoint you as Commander-in-Chief, India, but remember feeling that it was wrong to separate you from the operational command. You can very well imagine my feelings on finding that I myself was the person picked to take over this immensely difficult role.

I am however much comforted by the thought that in the early stages at least my Headquarters will be alongside yours and I hope that you will allow me to seek your advice and help in the formation of various plans with which I have been charged.

I made friends with Wingate during his trip across the Atlantic with us in the *Queen Mary* and found him a man very much after my own heart. The decision to implement the Long Range Penetration Group policy on such a big scale was made by the Chiefs of Staff Committee led by C.I.G.S. I fully realize from your signal how much this cuts across your plans for the Army in India and would like to say how much I realize what all this will mean. On the other hand it would be dishonest of me not to say that I voted whole-heartedly for this particular decision, knowing so well that whatever your personal feelings were you would support this decision to the hilt. . . .

There appears to be a conspiracy among all the highly placed in this country to overload my staff with a number of experts and their assistants, but I intend to try and keep my staff within reasonable bounds as I have a horror of very large and swollen staffs.

The only other Supreme Allied Command we have to go by is that of Eisenhower who has, I am told, not less than 1,500 officers in his Headquarters. I hope that we shall be able to keep the South-East Asia Command Headquarters to a fifth or even a tenth of this number. It is for that reason that I am hoping to use the staffs of the three Commanders-in-Chief within the Command in order to avoid duplication and irresponsible planning. I hope also that you may find it possible to appoint a representative in whom you have confidence to join our party at S.E.A.C. Headquarters, and also that you will never hesitate to come in person to any of our Commanders-in-Chief meetings which affect you; you know how flattered I will be to have you and the benefit of your advice.

I expect to leave about September 24 by air, and after spending about a week at New Delhi I have been instructed by the President and Prime Minister to go on to Chungking to visit my illustrious colleague, Chiang Kai-Shek.

I am giving this letter to Mallaby to bring out and he will tell you of the various meetings which he attended at this Headquarters and of the general decisions we arrived at. I cannot tell you how helpful he has been with all his advice and I am glad to know that he himself is in complete agreement with the various decisions which I finally reached.

I am looking forward so much again to seeing you and to the privilege of being associated with you in the great task which lies ahead of us.<sup>1</sup>

Mountbatten, at forty-three, was coming to the first great challenge of his illustrious career. Auchinleck, at fifty-nine, had been tempered by victory and defeat, by sudden, soaring fame and equally sudden obscurity, by immense responsibility and harsh adversity. Mountbatten's swift rise had been in spite of rather than as a result of his royal birth and connexions. His ambitions, his ability, his charm, his intelligence and his driving capacity were not diminished, though they were marred, by a streak of strangely childish vanity. The differences between the two men were not merely those of age, heredity, environment and professional experience. Across more than four years they were to be yoked in a momentous association; and when that association came to an end, the face of India, and of the whole of South-East Asia, would have been changed beyond all recognition.

In the event, the new Supreme Allied Commander did not leave England until October 2. On October 7 he arrived in India, which he had first visited as a young naval officer and A.D.C. to his cousin, the Prince of Wales, in 1921.

<sup>1</sup> The message referred to at the beginning of this letter is not in the Auchinleck papers. Gen. Mallaby, the D.M.O., had been sent to London when it was at last realized that the views of someone other than Wingate on operations in Burma might be of help.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### The Chief

THE life which now opened up for Auchinleck had much about it that was agreeable and attractive. The Commander-in-Chief, in the hierarchic stratification of British-Indian official society, took precedence immediately after the Viceroy, and was entitled to be called 'His Excellency'. The amenities of his existence, both private and official, were considerable. Delhi was now the capital and administrative centre of India all the year round. The great twice-yearly *hagira* from the plains to the hills and back again was no longer made; certain Government departments, of no urgent significance to the war effort, were now permanently based in Simla, but all the major work of ruling and administering the sub-continent and of transforming it into an efficient base for the great projected campaigns in South-East Asia was performed in Delhi, which as a consequence was grossly overcrowded.

It cannot be said that the Commander-in-Chief suffered directly from this well-nigh universal war-time affliction of great capital cities. New Delhi had been laid out on a very grand scale indeed—it was once remarked that it was a city built by rich men for very rich men—and though many of the princely palaces were more sumptuous, the Commander-in-Chief's was probably the most elegant, distinguished and civilized house in that strange, sprawling city.<sup>1</sup> Northern India is a land of exquisitely landscaped gardens; the Commander-in-Chief's garden was amongst the most beautiful in Delhi. The house itself looked like an English or Irish country house of middling size. Its public rooms were lofty; it was charmingly furnished. Long windows looked on the terrace, the garden and a belt of woodland; and two tall grey cranes (Auchinleck's importation) stalked with immense solemnity across the lawns and between the brightly gleaming pools.

When Auchinleck went, in the phrase which was of the essence of British-ruled India, 'to office', it was to a big room on the first floor

<sup>1</sup> At the end of the Raj it became, and it remained, the official residence of the Prime Minister of India.

of G.H.Q., which was housed in a wing of the great Secretariat buildings that flanked the ceremonial approach to the Viceroy's palace. The principal staff officers had their rooms along the same corridor. In the anteroom outside the Chief's office sat his Private Secretary, Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Ridgway, who more than three years before had been on his staff in Norway.

Auchinleck was the first Commander-in-Chief in India to have an Indian A.D.C. His first was Nawabzada Murtaza Ali Khan, the son of his friend the Nawab of Rampur. His British A.D.C.s were usually young officers with good regimental records and distinguished service in the field to their credit. For some months immediately after he returned as Commander-in-Chief, his British A.D.C. was Ronald Hamilton, formerly G.S.O.1 of Tenth Army in Persia. When that formation was disbanded Hamilton arrived, with a pool of unemployed staff officers, at Jullundur in India, and having held his previous appointment for under three months was reduced from lieutenant-colonel to captain. He was appointed A.D.C. in July 1943. In his diary he recorded his impressions:

*July 14*

I am living in the Chief's house. . . . I have a lovely big room and a bathroom, and the whole atmosphere is of a large country house. . . . The Chief arrived in time for dinner, and was charming. A very charming, quick, solid, impressive personality.

*July 19*

I might be much worse placed and have been thinking what it must have been like for a *really* big man like the Chief to be in the wilderness. Apparently during that period he once said to the Bishop of Lahore, 'You know, when one just *has* been somebody, it is a little hard to be nobody at all.'

In August the Maharajah of Nepal paid a State visit to Delhi. He called on the Commander-in-Chief.

*August 16*

The big excitement today was that Nepal called on the Chief. . . . We had the guard turned out, and we met him in the hall. He was wearing . . . a black chauffeur's hat, black frock coat, white trousers caught up at the ankle, and button boots. He had in his hat a magnificent badge of crossed kukris in diamonds which . . . he only wears when visiting or receiving the great, and which is worth £20,000. He had been preceded by



two A.D.C.s who had laid out his gifts for the Chief in the drawing-room. These included a magnificent tiger skin, several boxes, an urn, a photograph of himself framed in ivory, two superb elephant tusks, a bale or two of stuffs, rhino-skin jackets embroidered with sequins, and a fine kukri in a black and gold sheath. Actually the Chief is not allowed to keep the really valuable stuff, and has to hand it in to the External Affairs Department. The Chief conversed in the drawing-room with the Maharajah and General Bahadur, while Robin and I kept the A.D.C.s in play on the veranda. Then His Highness took his departure, and the visit appeared to have been a success.

Punctilio demanded a return call:

*August 17*

At 10 o'clock we had to pay a return call to the Maharajah, and I had timed the route yesterday so we turned into the gates of Nepal House exactly on 10. A v. smart guard of honour was drawn up on the lawn, so out we hopped, halted in front of it, and the Chief took the salute. The guard was found by a unit of the Nepalese State forces—and damned good they were, excellent drill and good on their silver bugles. . . . Then we walked up the drive to the house, and the Maharajah, dressed as yesterday, was waiting to receive the Chief on the steps. We walked in between two rows of Nepalese generals and colonels, and each one was presented to the Chief. . . .

The Maharajah reads English well, but is apparently shy about speaking. He always says a little set speech at the start, after which old Bahadur interprets—however, sometimes he catches old Bahadur in a mistake. On his arrival *chez nous* yesterday he said to the Chief, 'It is an honour to meet you, you are a great soldier, and you saved Africa.' Today he said, 'It is a great honour that you should call on me in my house.'

A few days later Hamilton noted:

*August 23*

The Chief in cracking form and v. chatty on the way to the office. As we entered G.H.Q. he observed that it smelt 'like a zoo'.

G.H.Q. was indeed apt to smell like a zoo in the hot weather, but its mental and moral atmosphere was much healthier than that of

Cairo. For Auchinleck, in whose private, inner life there was a deepening sorrow and an increasing sense of loss, his work became the focus and centre of all thought and feeling. It was work different in kind from that which he had discharged in the earlier part of the war, but its responsibilities were just as onerous and just as delicate. There was, for example, the Prime Minister's onslaught of criticism, encouraged if not directly provoked by his conversations with Wingate, and directed against the size and military efficiency (or, as he thought, lack of it) of the Indian Army. This reached a peak in August 1943, and the Viceroy, the Secretary of State for India and the C.I.G.S. were brought into the argument. Auchinleck did not submit tamely.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*9 September 1943*

I enclose a copy of a paper, which I have written for the information of the Viceroy and the Secretary of State, on the subject of the size and composition of the Indian Army. As you know, this matter has been engaging the attention of the Prime Minister lately and I think it is most important that he and you should be properly informed on the subject. The paper represents the situation as I see it and I believe it to be a correct statement of fact, based on my knowledge and experience of India.

2. I think the time has come to ask you to begin to consider seriously the release of the Indian formations now in the Middle East with a view to their return to India. My reason for asking this is that these formations and units are largely comprised of seasoned and experienced officers and men. Their return to India would enable me to dispense with a number of the more recently raised units and formations, which must be of a lower standard than those which have served for a long period overseas.

The inclusion of these experienced and hardened troops in the Indian formations which must bear a large part in the offensive against the Japanese would greatly strengthen them, especially in respect of regimental officers, which is our weakest link at present.

I realize that this request may not come at the most opportune moment, but it is one which will have to be seriously considered before long and I think you should be aware of this. I would not ask for the withdrawal of Indian troops from Iraq or Persia for the time being as I feel that these countries must remain primarily an Indian responsibility for some time to come, as they have so often been before and with good reason.

3. There is one more point I would like to bring to your notice—the matter of providing shipping to enable regular leave

to be given to the Indian troops in the Middle East and Persia and Iraq Commands. I have seen the argument used lately by the War Office that as British troops do not get leave in the United Kingdom, Indian troops should not need to go on leave to India.

I need hardly tell you that this is a dangerous theory. All Indian soldiers are volunteers and, as you know, the great majority of them, being landholders, are not necessarily dependent on their pay and allowances for the support of themselves and their families, but rely on the produce of their land as well. It is most desirable for them to get home at fairly frequent intervals, not greater than two years if possible, to see to their families and their land.

If they cannot do this, they are liable to become restless and discontented, and this state of mind communicates itself rapidly to the villages, with the result that recruiting is apt to be affected, and also the morale of the fighting classes as a whole.

... I shall be most grateful if you will support me in this matter, which I know to be most important.

In the enclosed document Auchinleck made mincemeat of the facile and ill-informed attacks on the size and composition of the Indian Army. The Army's gross total at that time was some two million men. Of these, one and a quarter million could be counted as combatants; a third of this number—some 429,000 men—were in training establishments, in various stages of development into soldiers. When these were subtracted, a true total of 817,000 combatant soldiers, in all formations, was left. 200,000 out of the 817,000 were serving overseas, chiefly in the Middle East and Paiforce. On the soil of India there were therefore some 617,000 fighting soldiers: 70,000 of these were allotted to Frontier Defence (i.e. the North-West Frontier) and 129,000 to the defence of internal lines of communication, ports, airfields, arsenals, stores, depots, etc., which (Auchinleck pointed out firmly) 'in this country need just as much if not more attention than they received in the United Kingdom in 1940 and subsequent years'. A final 8,000 odd were in process of being raised and were not yet allotted to formations. He continued:

This leaves some 413,000 combatants available to fight the Japanese in Burma or overseas when the time comes. Roughly this total may be said to equal ten divisions inclusive of the various ancillary and administrative units required to maintain them. At the moment there are the equivalent of nine 'Indian' divisions (which include the usual proportion of British troops) in the Field Army and G.H.Q. Reserve.

The balance comprises two tank brigades, long range penetration and parachute troops, together with armoured, motorized and other various units not in formations.

Of the nine 'Indian' divisions, six are allotted to the Fourteenth Army for the prosecution of the offensive against the Japanese in Burma and to provide a reserve at the disposal of the Army Commander to enable him systematically to relieve troops which have been continuously in touch with the enemy for long periods under arduous conditions. After careful consideration and consultation with the Army Commander I have concluded that no reduction in this allotment is possible without prejudicing unduly the chances of success of his projected operations.

The other three divisions comprise one armoured and two infantry divisions which at the moment compose the reserve at the disposal of G.H.Q., but one of these divisions is already assigned to a reinforcement role in connexion with an operation to be carried out next winter. The remaining units which are not in formations provide an essential mobile G.H.Q. reserve available for the reinforcement of the Frontier Defence Troops or the Internal Security Troops, or if need arises, of the reduced garrison of the Persia-Iraq Command. . . .

The number of combatant troops allotted to Internal Defence and Frontier Defence is kept under close and constant scrutiny, and I am satisfied that, at the moment, no large reduction can be effected here, particularly if these troops have to be drawn on to provide an increased number of long range penetration troops as proposed by the Chiefs of Staff in London. In any event any reduction under these heads must be gradual and of the nature of one or two units at a time. There can be no question of making any sweeping reduction here, without running risks which I am not prepared to accept.

No reduction in the odd 200,000 combatant troops in overseas commands can be made unless H.M.G. are prepared to relieve these troops from their present commitments and return them to India. . . .

The idea underlying the demand for reduction seems to be based on the idea that the Indian Army, owing to its great size and expansion, is now composed to a large extent of men who, because they belong to classes previously untried as soldiers, are unreliable and unsuitable.

Auchinleck therefore analysed very closely the 'class composition' of the formations raised since the outbreak of war, many of which

consisted largely of men from sections of the community for long regarded (fallaciously) as 'non-martial'; and he affirmed his belief that they were demonstrating their worth as soldiers. He pointed out the unfortunate potential effect of the sudden disbandment of these units, and dealt at some length with the difficulties of finding suitable N.C.O.s, V.C.O.s and officers, and added:

It may be emphasized here that it is the impossibility of providing sufficient officers, British or Indian, of the right stamp and quality which precludes any further expansion of the Indian Army, and it is for this reason that a halt has been called.

He yielded nothing in his conclusion:

If the Army in India is to meet its present and future commitments in full, no large reduction can be made in the combatant ranks of the Indian Army, unless H.M.G. release the Indian troops now employed overseas for return to India. Even should this be possible, the position will have to be reviewed in the light of the strategical situation obtaining at the time.

Since two Indian divisions were fighting hard and gallantly in Italy, and a third was due to join them, the warning in this summing-up was clear. The Prime Minister, from whose conversations with Wingate the criticism had originated, stayed his hand—but only for the time being. As was his habit, he would renew the attack later.

\* \* \*

On September 16 the Secretary of State for India had a long conversation with the C.I.G.S. Amery wrote in his diary:

I was very glad to hear from him that the telegram which Auchinleck has sent at my suggestion on the seriousness of the food situation has really stirred up the Chiefs of Staff, and they are going to bring the matter up before the Cabinet. . . .

The famine in Bengal had dragged on miserably through and beyond the monsoon. But more than a month was to pass before any effective measures were taken to deal with it. Field-Marshal Lord Wavell<sup>1</sup> was installed as Viceroy and Governor-General on 20 October 1943. He at once got to grips with the situation. He flew to

<sup>1</sup> He had been created a Viscount on 1 July 1943.

Calcutta, saw for himself how matters stood, and decided to give the Army immediate powers to deal with it.

On November 1 Auchinleck approved an emergency scheme for the employment of military resources. It consisted of two inter-linked organizations, one to raise and utilize every available kind of transport, by water, road or rail, the other to make sure, by supervision and control, that any supplies released went to the right people in the right areas. Distribution centres were set up in the distressed areas; a sizeable mobile force—a motorized brigade, five infantry battalions, a general hospital, two field ambulances and a casualty clearing station—detached for the purpose, took over the task with resolution and energy. More than a hundred medical officers, of whom a number were specialists in hygiene, were drafted to the districts.

The whole project was as efficient as it was humane. Public confidence in the capacity of the Government—working through the Army—was at least partially restored. The output of relief supplies from Calcutta to the districts was doubled in less than a fortnight. Using every boat and every vehicle it could find, the Army opened up the hoarded grain in the go-downs and granaries and vigilantly controlled its distribution in the famine areas. The price of food-grains dropped sharply; the refugees who had fled to Calcutta returned to their villages; and the city resumed its normal raffish aspect.

*Viceroy to General Auchinleck*

*2 November 1943*

I have telegraphed to the Secretary of State the information about the action you have taken to assist Bengal. It makes a most heartening report and I think will ease considerably Amery's passage in the debate in the House of Commons which takes place on Thursday. I am quite sure that your action will lead to the saving of many lives in Bengal and to the gradual retrieving of a lamentable situation.

I need hardly say how deeply grateful I am to you for the quickness and scale of the action you have taken. The Army has a great chance to prove itself once more as efficient an agent in civil emergencies as in military.

*Secretary of State for India to General Auchinleck*

*11 November 1943*

Just a line to let you know from this end how much I have appreciated the way in which the Army in India has helped over this grievous famine business in Bengal, both before the Viceroy intervened and since he made his suggestions to the Bengal

Government. I can only hope that with the Army's help the corner can be turned in Bengal and things kept going until the rice harvest.

You must not think that either the Chiefs of Staff or myself failed to impress urgently upon the War Cabinet the necessity, if India is to be an effective base of operations, of securing food supplies, but the shipping position seems to be extraordinarily difficult at this moment and does not look like easing up for a long time to come.

The general question of easing the strain on India is also being thoroughly gone into inter-departmentally at this end. The trouble is that every shifting of supply to India from some other source increases the strain elsewhere and seems to add to the shipping problem. But it certainly looks as if the Middle East will have to take a great deal more of the strain of future operations.

Linlithgow will no doubt have communicated to you an earlier message of mine letting you know how much I appreciated the fine co-operative spirit in which you have arranged to fit things in in the matter of the South-East Asia Command. I am sure the Viceroy, Mountbatten and yourself will be a great and indivisible trinity.

\* \* \*

South-East Asia Command was officially established with effect from midnight on November 15-16, and the operational control of the forces facing the Japanese on the Assam-Burma border passed to the new Command. Despite Mountbatten's protestations in his letter to Auchinleck of September 2, the influx of experts in attendance was considerable; their bustling advent provoked more than one wry twitch of amusement on the countenances of those who had lived through the months and the years in which India had been—in Wavell's words—'at the end of the supply line in men and materials'. Even so there was much 'hiving-off' of staff officers from G.H.Q. (India) to Sacsca (Supreme Allied Command, South-East Asia), especially during the initial period in which the latter Headquarters was temporarily established in Delhi.

A shrewd, important and knowledgeable observer of these processes wrote:

While the new Headquarters was quickly getting into its stride, there arose in Delhi one disturbing feature—a growing danger of serious friction between Supreme Headquarters, South-East Asia, and General Headquarters, India. Many of the newly arrived staff had no knowledge of India, its limitations or its capabilities,

and sometimes they showed the arrogance of ignorance. The old hands at Indian Headquarters in their turn were too ready to resent their displacement in control of operations and to be sensitive to criticism of their past efforts. It was only the admirable good sense of the Commanders themselves that avoided the catastrophe of a split into two factions, the pro-Mountbatten and the pro-Auchinleck. They set their faces firmly against any encouragement of this rivalry, and, in spite of the many real difficulties, co-operated fully and unselfishly. Had they not, success in South-East Asia would have been longer delayed.<sup>1</sup>

One newcomer, not to Sacsca but to G.H.Q. (India), was unaffectedly welcome. In September the Secretary of State agreed to the appointment of a Principal Administrative Officer, on the grounds that it was desirable to have in India a single authority who could deal comprehensively with the mass of demands of all sorts which were to be expected—justifiably expected—from S.E.A.C. This appointment would be analogous to one already announced for S.E.A.C. The advantages were obvious in having a parallel authority in G.H.Q. (India) with whom this officer could deal without having to approach each administrative branch separately. The officer chosen for this appointment was Lieutenant-General Sir Wilfrid Lindsell, who had for some time discharged a similar task in the Middle East. His great administrative capacity was tried to the utmost in his new appointment; and he passed every test triumphantly. He, too, was one of the bulwarks of the *accord* which both Auchinleck and Mountbatten strove so assiduously to maintain.

Not all senior officers were quite so helpful. There were some hair-raising differences of opinion with Stilwell; and Wingate returned in September, awe-inspiringly conscious of his new power. At the first conference which he attended on the 21st, presided over by Auchinleck's D.C.G.S. and attended by the heads of most of the main departments in G.H.Q., Wingate became convinced that he was faced with deliberate obstruction. The comments on his demands shared, in his opinion, a common theme and omission: stress on the difficulties, and no suggestions as to how to overcome them. His anger boiled over more than once, and when the D.C.G.S. invited him to answer the points that had been raised, he stood up and hectorcd the meeting harshly. He said:

Though the decisions made at Quebec have been conveyed to

<sup>1</sup> *Defeat Into Victory* by Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, p. 203.



India, it is manifest that so far no effort has been made in India to implement them. Unless this train of events is changed, and I receive whole-hearted support from all departments concerned in G.H.Q., I shall be obliged to tell the Prime Minister, by the direct channel of communication allowed to me by Mr. Churchill, that there is no chance of the operations which I have promised, and with which I have been entrusted, meeting with success. I shall therefore ask to be relieved of my present responsibilities.

At another conference a few days later the chairman announced that he would open the meeting, but that in ten minutes he would vacate the chair, as he had to go on to another. Immediately Wingate swept up his papers and said: 'Then we will all go and not waste our time. Please let us know when you are free to attend a conference.'

Christopher Sykes said that Wingate 'showed himself insistently determined to follow up the advantage he had from Quebec . . . ' and that he 'asserted his right to be treated as a master-factor . . .'.<sup>1</sup> To those who suffered these open insults Wingate appeared—whatever his unquestioned talents as a commander—a churlish bully, resentful of imagined snubs and rebuffs in the past, and eager now to demonstrate his recently acquired authority. It is only fair to add that he never tried to bully the Commander-in-Chief.

While Wingate was indulging in these displays, Auchinleck, before he handed over to Mounbatten, offered to the C.I.G.S. a sapient analysis of the main difficulties in India Command which, before his own reappointment, had caused so much criticism at home.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

*18 September 1943*

Last year troops had to be launched into operations before they were fully trained, without any real experience of jungle conditions; moreover there were no trained formations available to relieve troops in the forward areas, which had, therefore, to remain continuously under severe strain in adverse climatic conditions. The sick rate, particularly from malaria, was very high, with the result that most battalions eventually became largely composed of recruits who had just finished their initial training and had had no war training at all, and still less, any training to accustom them to jungle warfare. It was not surprising, therefore, that towards the end of the campaign they sometimes failed to give a good account of themselves. It is to be emphasized that such failures were by no means universal.

<sup>1</sup> *Orde Wingate* by Christopher Sykes, p. 472.

Owing to the course this war has taken, many commanders were inexperienced and some were too old. I am doing all I can to remedy this state of affairs, but battle is the only real test whether the scene be Africa or Burma.

The reorganization of the system of instruction in training centres, and the institution of training divisions, as well as the reorganization of the instruction at officers' training schools will, I hope, go far to improve the individual efficiency of reinforcements, particularly in jungle warfare, both of junior officers and of other ranks.

Collective training is not easy owing to the widely separated location of the tracts suitable for jungle warfare training, and the fact that they are almost invariably highly malarious. Troops have often to be moved long distances by rail and this throws an additional strain on the already overworked transportation system. We are doing our best, however, to compete with this problem and I hope that all divisions will be trained and ready for operations by the end of this year. I can assure you that I shall not allow any formation to go into battle until it is adequately trained.

Malaria has been much less than was expected amongst the troops which have been in contact with the enemy throughout the monsoon. Giffard is satisfied with the morale of these two divisions, the 23rd and 26th, and they have been carrying out active and successful patrolling against the enemy. I think the troops are now beginning to be convinced that they have the upper hand of the Japanese so far as patrol work is concerned.

#### *Administrative problems and possibilities*

As regards administration, the period . . . was one long struggle against time, space, and natural difficulties such as floods, landslides and cyclones, with inadequate resources of both trained personnel and material. On the top of all this was the severe dislocation caused by the Congress disturbances in the autumn.<sup>1</sup> The lack of material resources was due very largely to the continual cuts in shipping, which kept us well below our minimum essential tonnage and were invariably made at the eleventh hour. The reason was always clear but the effect was to stultify all efforts to achieve effective forward planning.

<sup>1</sup> In the summer and autumn of 1942 there had been in many parts of India a widespread and violent anti-British uprising, to which Congress leaders gave a considerable measure of support, resulting in large-scale damage to property, disturbance of communications, loss of life and a severe threat to internal security and the economy of the country.

Our present difficulties are well known to you and there is no need to recapitulate them here.

Changes in the administrative organization and layout have been made as the result of experience and the situation has improved in so far as material resources are concerned. But the great distances, poor communications, and natural obstacles of climate and terrain are, and will be, always with us. If, therefore, we are asked to carry out tasks which are patently beyond our powers and leave no margin for contingencies, the administrative situation will remain in an unstable condition and be liable to upset hopes and forecasts based on false premises.

Provided administrative difficulties are taken fully into account and plans are laid accordingly on a realistic basis, I, personally, have no fear that the troops will fail their leaders or that they will not do all that is asked of them.

P.S. I feel too that we have now got good leaders and I do not think that *they* will fail the troops!

\* \* \*

Auchinleck's life assumed a pattern of strenuous regularity. His energy and his zest were unquenchable. The conversion of his Command into a huge base and training area for S.E.A.C. was not for him a negative or a frustrating experience. Whatever disappointment he had felt in not exercising command in battle was swiftly swallowed up in the absorbing interest of the job in hand.

He, who had known India and served India all his life, vastly extended his knowledge and added to his record of service in these years. His physical stamina matched his mental alertness. He was endlessly on the move. Before the war a Commander-in-Chief's tour, in any part of India, had been a stately and elaborate progress, hedged around with ritual and protocol. Auchinleck broke through to reality. At last he had his own aircraft at his disposal, and could—and did—reach every part of India. His visits of inspection were as thorough as they were informal. His entourage was small—his Private Secretary, an A.D.C., perhaps a specialist officer or two, and, since these tours had a firm morale-building purpose, a photographer or an Indian Army observing officer. Great headquarters interested him less than small units or sub-units, in remote places, doing little-known but important jobs.

The quality which had never failed him was uppermost now: his passionate interest in human beings, not only for what they did or for the uniforms and badges of rank which they wore, but for what

they themselves were. He was never bored. He never appeared out of temper. When he made criticisms he made them firmly and courteously. Every soldier felt himself more of a soldier because the Chief had not merely inspected him as he stood to attention in a formal parade, but had talked to him in his own language, known his name, been interested in his work and background.

With officers and men of the Indian Army he had inevitably the bond of a unique, unbreakable relationship. He was one of them in every fibre of his being. His influence and his authority made it, in all its vast expansion in these years, in essence what it had always been: a brotherhood linked by strong ties of loyalty and affection. But to the thousands of British, of all ranks, civilians put into uniform for the duration of the war, he brought the same infectious comradeship and understanding.

The external arrangements of his tours were unobtrusively efficient. The pattern varied little: the aircraft taking off before or into the brief coolness of dawn over Palam airfield, the swift journeying from one unit to another, the handshakes, the short speech in English or in Urdu. There were familiar faces—senior V.C.O.s, bemedalled pensioners, someone's grandson who was hoping to enter the regiment next year. There were the boys and recruits in training. There were the experts and specialists and skilled tradesmen. There were the enthusiasts and the craftsmen; there were those who saw in the building and expansion of the Army the most practical steps towards the building of a new, free India. There were the tired and the homesick and the disgruntled. Always there were people; and the background to the endlessly repeated, endlessly varied experience was the tremendous changeful landscape of India, mountain and jungle, desert and town, the great rivers, the crumbling cities, the temples and the shrines, and the little villages, beyond number, which are the basic expression and condition of human life in this harsh and majestic setting.

This was work which could not truly be measured in statistics, for its effects lay in the realm of morale and of human relations, and in that realm were ineffaceable and unforgettable. However, a scrupulous record was preserved of the Commander-in-Chief's tours, month by month and year by year, during the war and afterwards. Between 21 June 1943 and 15 August 1947 he travelled on duty, by road, rail and air, a total of 162,609 miles. In the first six months of his command, between his birthday and Christmas Day 1943, he made ten separate tours, including visits to Imphal and Tamu on the Assam front, to Quetta, and to Peshawar and Kohat on the North-West Frontier. As the years lengthened the pace was relentlessly

sustained, and the knowledge and the experience accumulated. Most of the tours were of short duration, because Auchinleck, though the least chairborne of commanders, was in control of a huge, many-sided administrative and technical organization. However much the human aspect of his responsibilities attracted him, and however valuable his work in that field, the organization could never be neglected.

\* \* \*

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

7 November 1943

So far as I know, no official suggestion has been made that India might again become militarily responsible for Iraq and Iran.

I have, however, more than once mentioned lately India's concern and interest in this area to the C.I.G.S. in personal correspondence with him, and we have been keeping a close watch on events there, so that we may be ready to meet any demands for help likely to be made on us.

I am pretty sure myself that such demands will be made before the war is over, as I think that the Persian situation at any rate is likely to deteriorate seriously. If the Persian situation gets out of hand, the Afghan situation is likely to be affected, and with it the tribal situation on the North-West Frontier.

My own opinion is, therefore, that it would probably be sound if India were once again to take over this responsibility.

On the other hand, it would involve us in many complex problems with the Russians and the Americans and, perhaps, with the Turks, and, just at the moment, I feel we have got a good many difficult problems on our hands, at least until the South-East Asia Command learns the ropes and settles down to its job.

I have, therefore, asked the General Staff to make a short appreciation of the considerations involved and to submit a recommendation. . . .

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

12 December 1943

Thank you for your letter of the 7th on the subject of the morale of the Indian Army.<sup>1</sup> I have given it careful thought and the following are my views on the subject.

In the last forty years the Indian Army has undergone two major reorganizations and re-designating of units. Once, in 1902, when Kitchener merged the three old Presidency armies and the

<sup>1</sup> This letter is not in the Auchinleck papers.

Punjab Frontier Force into one army, with its cavalry and infantry regiments and battalions numbered consecutively throughout, except that Gurkha regiments had their own sequence of numbers.

This arrangement lasted till 1922, when the reductions following the war of 1914-18 compelled an amalgamation of many pairs of cavalry regiments to form one unit and a consequent renumbering and redesignating of these units.

The pre-war system of single infantry battalions each with its own small depot which was supposed to maintain its strength on service, completely broke down under the stress of modern war. The infantry were therefore regrouped into regiments comprising, as a rule, four or five battalions, each regiment being fed by a training battalion or depot.

As a regimental officer at the time, I naturally did not like this change any more than anyone else, but I am sure it was very wise and very necessary.

It has stood the test of this war, which the old system would never have done, and I could not recommend that it should be changed.

In twenty years, a new loyalty and a new *esprit de corps*—to the regiment—has grown up in spite of, in my opinion, misguided efforts by some of the older officers to prevent it.

The vast majority of the Indian ranks now serving have forgotten the old system, though its memory is still kept alive by old pensioners—and old officers! I am quite sure myself that the average Indian soldier, though he is very proud of his unit as a rule, has not got the same sentimental attachment to names and traditions as have his British officers or British soldiers either.

After this war, I am quite sure that the regimental titles as now existing will be even more firmly rooted in the Army than ever were the majority of those which came into being in 1902. The honours won in this war are connected for always with the new nomenclature. I feel that it would be a great error to try and change this now.

I feel also that, in any event, when the Indian Army is re-organized after the war, there will inevitably be many changes in its composition and organization, and I feel that a number of its existing units may have to disappear and be replaced by others bearing different territorial designations.

I do feel, however, that your suggestion to add to their existing titles the names of the battles in which units have distinguished themselves deserves careful examination and should, I think, be quite feasible.

There is one objection to it, namely, the fact that many Indian units have already got rather long and cumbersome titles, such as '5th Bn (King George V's Own) (Jacob's Rifles), 10th Baluch Regiment' or '6th Royal Bn (Scinde), 13th Frontier Force Rifles', or '2nd Bn (Duke of Cambridge's Own) (Brownlow's) 14th Punjab Regiment'.

The only way in which it could be done would be, I think, to add the 'battle name' to that of the particular battalion which had earned it, e.g. '2nd (Arakan) Bn, 1st Punjab Regiment', or '4th (Keren) Bn, 6th Rajputana Rifles'. I am having the possibilities of this examined and will submit the results to you.

I would, however, like to reassure you by saying again that, in my opinion, the spirit of the regiment has now really taken the place of the pre-1914 *esprit de bataillon*, and that it is not now possible to revert to the old system. The old battalion spirit depended very largely on the fact that in those days each battalion did its own recruiting, which was very much a family affair, and, as such, most successful for small frontier and other minor wars.

Nowadays recruiting is collective for the whole regiment and could not, in my opinion, be otherwise so long as we are liable to be engaged in 'Great' wars.

*General Auchinleck to Secretary of State for India* 23 December 1943

Thank you very much for your letter of November 11<sup>1</sup> and for what you said in it. I am very glad that we have been able to help things along in any way both in Bengal and also in connexion with the new S.E. Asia Command. Mountbatten and his staff (which is a healthy and growing child) are settling down, but naturally have to depend on us for much information and help. We are, I think, giving them of our best and will continue to do so while I have any say in the matter.

I had four very strenuous months of operational planning before Mountbatten and his men arrived, but I thoroughly enjoyed it and I think we provided them with a pretty comprehensive collection of material and suggestions.

I know very well how much you are doing to help us in our task out here. I think I understand too how difficult it must be at times to make people at home realize our difficulties, as many must appear capable of solution by India herself. Our immediate bogey seems to be no longer the famine in Bengal but shortage of

<sup>1</sup> Quoted above, pp. 759-60.

coal. You will know all about this. The Viceroy has the matter in hand I know, but it is causing us much anxiety.

I have been able to get away from Delhi a good deal lately, now that S.E.A.C. have taken over, and I have met a lot of officers and seen many units. On the whole I think things are satisfactory, in fact surprisingly so, considering that we are in the fifth year of war with an entirely voluntary Army.

I am very glad indeed that they have at last agreed to give the Military Medal to the Indian Army. As you know, I have been anxious to bring this about for nearly two years now. I hope it will be possible to give it publicity at home and to stress the fact that it is a mark of recognition of the services of the Indian Army in this war.

*Viceroy to General Auchinleck*

24 December 1943

My dear Claude

All best wishes for Xmas and 1944. It is a great comfort to have your help and advice. 1944 is going to be a difficult but interesting year.

Yours,

ARCHIE.

The decision that Indian other ranks and N.C.O.s should be eligible for the M.M. was a victory in a long, hard battle which Auchinleck had been waging since before he left the Middle East. The resistance to the idea, both in the Cabinet and in the War Office, had been tenacious, and was one more expression of the deep and ambivalent emotions of the British ruling classes towards India.

In a second battle on another issue Auchinleck was not so successful.

*General Auchinleck to C.I.G.S.*

5 January 1944

I sent you a wire telling how glad I was to hear of your elevation,<sup>1</sup> and I say it again now. I hope it doesn't mean you are not going to stay where you are, you must!

May I advocate one more lost cause! You must think I am a d—d nuisance, but I can't help it! You know the Eighth Army are to be allowed to wear an Arabic '8' on the ribbon of the Africa Star, but only those who fought after the final advance from El Alamein. I think this is doing a great injustice to those brave men who, under Cunningham and Ritchie, fought and broke Rommel

<sup>1</sup> Brooke's promotion to Field-Marshal had just been announced.



in November and December 1941. After all they took on the Germans and beat them in open fight for the first time on a large scale in the war. They did this, as you know yourself, with inferior armament and equipment (I know it was the best that could be given them) and with practically equal numbers. If Rommel had not been thrust back to Agheila with the loss of nearly all his tanks and two-thirds of his men, he might well have taken Tobruk that Christmas and then pushed on into Egypt. There was not a great deal—in the way of armour—to stop him. Again, after Tobruk fell, the men who held the Germans at Alamein surely laid the foundations for the final victory of the Eighth Army?

I am not speaking for myself because I am not greatly concerned, but I do feel very deeply that it would be most invidious to make this distinction. I ask you to get it extended to all who served with the Eighth Army from the date of its formation. I am sure you will be rewarded by the sincere gratitude of many gallant men who will live to wear the ribbon long after you and I have gone. If you think it any use, I am ready to write to the P.M. myself.

*C.I.G.S. to General Auchinleck*

*9 March 1944*

... I wrote to the Prime Minister supporting your request and he remitted your letter and mine to the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals in Time of War. They went into it carefully and have reported that they regret they cannot support your request. The reasons given are that to extend the issue as you proposed would inevitably involve a clasp for earlier operations. Indeed, Wavell, last year, put up a strong case for a clasp for his period of command and this was not accepted, and the King approved the rejection. Secondly, if extension were given to clasps for the Africa Star, claims for the 1939-43 Star to have clasps would be difficult to resist. The Admiralty in particular are strongly opposed to clasps for this Star. The variety of claimants, some with strong claims, would make the problem insoluble.

In short, the line between those who get clasps and those who do not get clasps is difficult enough to draw in any case. There must be anomalies and the easier way to prevent them growing is to stand firm on the original, if arbitrary, distinction and resist extensions.

While these considerations are debatable, I hope you will appreciate that the matter has had sympathetic consideration, but my support did not avail in the face of other arguments.

I am sorry not to have been more successful.

This was not the only matter on which there was an obstinate refusal on the part of higher authority to give a fair hearing to reasoned and justifiable arguments. Early in the new year the Prime Minister had reverted to his old discontent with and dislike for India Command.

*Prime Minister to General Ismay, for Chiefs of Staff Committee*

17 January 1944

This report [by the Joint Intelligence Staff on Japanese intentions in the South-East Asia area] confirms the view I have held for some time that the danger of invasion of India by Japan has passed. During the next few months the Eastern Fleet will come into being and will soon grow to a strength superior to any detachment which it would be worth while for the Japanese to make, having regard to the preoccupations in the Pacific. The air defence of India has also become very strong.

2. All the above brings me again to the conclusion that there ought to be a continuous reduction in the vast mass of low-grade troops now maintained under arms in India. Nearly two million men are on our pay-lists and ration strength, apart from the British troops in the country and on the frontier. The Viceroy and General Auchinleck should be instructed to reduce the numbers by at least half a million during the course of the present year. In this process, which will no doubt largely take place by uncompensated wastage, the greatest care should be taken to improve the quality of the remaining units and to rely as much as possible upon the martial races. An effort should be made to get back to the high efficiency and standard of the pre-war Indian troops. The officers and skilled personnel from the disbanded battalions should be concentrated on these units, thus increasing the officer, and particularly the white officer, cadre. The standards of recruiting should everywhere be stiffened, and the intake reduced to the limits of the really trustworthy fighting recruits.

3. Meanwhile I should like to have a financial statement from the India Office showing the cost of the military establishments in India (exclusive of British troops) for every year since the outbreak of war, together with the average bearing of manpower.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

<sup>1</sup> Winston S. Churchill, op. cit. Vol. V, pp. 600-1. It should be noted that a land invasion of India was exactly what the Japanese were at this time preparing. The Prime Minister's adherence to the exploded theory of 'the martial races' is also worthy of remark.

Fourteenth Army, the main operational land force at S.E.A.C.'s disposal, was commanded by an Indian Army officer, Lieutenant-General (later Field-Marshal Sir William) Slim. The majority of Fourteenth Army's subordinate formations were Indian. India was not only the base supply area and training ground for Fourteenth Army: it was the main reservoir of combatant troops. India's interest in its fortunes was therefore far from academic. The campaign of 1943-4 began in earnest in the Arakan on November 30. The story of the long months of hard fighting which followed has often been told, and is not immediately relevant to this narrative.

What must be stressed is the unflagging, unstinted support and co-operation which Fourteenth Army, Allied Land Forces South-East Asia, and South-East Asia Command as a whole, received from India Command throughout the whole duration of the campaign. This support was the result of Auchinleck's inspiration and leadership.

At the outset of the campaign, for example, the supply and ration situation was critical. To General Slim, in November 1943, it was obvious that something vigorous would have to be done to avoid disaster. He wrote long afterwards:

Luckily, General Auchinleck was the man to do it. There was a considerable and prompt injection of ginger into the Indian administrative machine, military and civil. Even at the beginning of 1944 the results of Auchinleck's drive began to show. Gradually, with now and then a temporary setback, our rations and our reserves climbed up and up. It was a good day for us when he took command of India, our main base, recruiting area and training ground. The Fourteenth Army, from its birth to its final victory, owed much to his unselfish support and never-failing understanding. Without him and what he and the Army in India did for us we could not have existed, let alone conquered.<sup>1</sup>

Guns, ammunition, vehicles, wireless sets, ambulances—Fourteenth Army was desperately short of them all. Wingate could bully overworked staff officers and threaten to tell the Prime Minister about them. This method of getting what he wanted was not open to Slim; nor would he have taken it if it had been. He knew—no one knew better—the efforts that India Command was making; and he also came to know the disdainful shrug with which legitimate demands made to the authorities in the United Kingdom were met.

<sup>1</sup> *Defeat Into Victory* by Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, pp. 175-6.

Their outlook on the matter of medical services was typical. The medical establishments of Fourteenth Army were lower than those of other British armies in Africa or Europe; and the actual strengths were gravely below even this reduced establishment. They were short of units, doctors, nurses and equipment. When Slim took command, there were 21,000 hospital beds, all occupied, under the control of his Director of Medical Services. To nurse these seriously sick and wounded men there were 414 nursing sisters—one nurse to every hundred beds by day or night.

Demands for more nurses from home were met with the answer that there were none to spare from other fronts and that, anyway, India should provide the nurses for Indian troops who formed the bulk of my army. We might just as well have been told that India must provide the aircraft for the air force. Aircraft were not made in India; nor were nurses. The Indian Military Nursing Service, struggling heroically against prejudice and every kind of handicap, was in its infancy and could only grow very slowly. In spite of all our efforts, and although General Auchinleck milked the hospitals of India to danger-point to help us, it was clear that any increase in our medical strength would be grievously slow.

I knew we had to beat Germany first. I was even ready to accept the fact that the Fourteenth Army was the Cinderella of all British armies, and would get only what her richer sisters in Africa and Europe could spare. I would not grumble too much if we came last for men, tanks, guns, and the rest, but I would protest, and never cease from protesting, that we should be at the bottom of the list for medical aid. That was not fair, nor, I believe, wise.<sup>1</sup>

Again and again Slim reverted to this theme of Auchinleck's efforts to help the fighting troops.<sup>2</sup> Nor was he alone, or prejudiced because he was an officer of the Indian Army.

*Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to General Auchinleck 13 March 1944*

The following is an extract from a letter I have just received from General Christison<sup>3</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 177-8.

<sup>2</sup> It is significant that out of nine references to Auchinleck listed in the index of *Defeat Into Victory*, six are under the heading 'helps solve difficulties of Fourteenth Army'.

<sup>3</sup> Lieut.-Gen. (later Gen.) Sir Philip Christison, Commander of 15th Corps in the Arakan, was a British Service officer (originally a Cameron Highlander).

'The troops are in great heart and the fact that, except for certain British battalions, we were at full strength in men, animals, stores and ammunition within a week of the close of the battle and so able to take the offensive again speaks volumes for the rear services controlled by Wheeler<sup>1</sup> and India Command.

'I must say it didn't look possible two months ago!'

I feel sure you will be glad to read this and will let Lindsell see it. I always think that tributes such as this from someone in the forward areas mean a great deal.

*Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to General Auchinleck 8 July 1944*

Now that I have returned to Kandy<sup>2</sup> I feel I must write and say how much impressed I was with the C.T.C.<sup>3</sup> at Cococanda and with its future potentialities.

It is without question the best designed C.T.C. that I have ever seen and from the point of view of training for operations in tropical conditions, the best situated. I will not enumerate all its many advantages as they must be familiar to you but there is no doubt it is an absolutely first-class place.

I particularly liked the fact that when finished it will be able to train one brigade group and one beach group at a time irrespective of which monsoon happens to be blowing. It will also be able to do this under conditions more nearly approaching those existing in the areas in which we have to operate than can be found anywhere in India.

I feel that the construction of this C.T.C. reflects the greatest credit on India and I only pray that we shall be allowed later on to take full advantage of its facilities.

I much enjoyed seeing you again in Delhi at the end of June and I feel we got extraordinarily good value out of our meetings even though I was there for such a short time. I am looking forward to coming up again in the future and next time I hope to be able to accept your invitation to stay with you. I very much hope I shall be able to persuade you to come down to the Island one of these days. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to show you these Headquarters and I know that you will get a great welcome from the Navy. What do you think of this idea?

<sup>1</sup> Gen. R. A. Wheeler (U.S. Army) was S.E.A.C.'s Principal Administrative Officer, whose relations with India Command and with his opposite number, Gen. Lindsell, were excellent.

<sup>2</sup> The Supreme Allied Commander's Headquarters were now in Ceylon.

<sup>3</sup> Combined Training Centre.

At the end of July 1944, when the tide of the war had turned in Burma, as two years before it had turned in the Western Desert, and the Japanese Army, in the great battles of Imphal and the Kohima-Imphal road, was beginning to suffer the worst defeat in its history, Mountbatten flew to London to give the Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet his account of events so far, and to state his demands—in manpower and equipment—for the future.

*General Auchinleck to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten 25 July 1944*

... I hope you will have a successful visit to England and that you will get all you want. I do not think it will be easy if past experience goes for anything, but I wish you the best of luck and you can count on our full support—you know that.

Mountbatten put his case strongly in London, and extracted undertakings that many of his demands, particularly in manpower, would be met.

*Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to General Auchinleck 29 August 1944*

... I cannot tell you how grateful and full of admiration I am for the magnificent way in which you and your staff have risen to the situation created by the increased forces being made available.

I prophesied to C.I.G.S. that this would be your line and I told him that the spirit in G.H.Q. India was so high that they could be relied upon to overcome difficulties which a year ago might have seemed insurmountable.

*Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to General Auchinleck 11 October 1944*

I am writing to thank you so much for inviting me to visit the new hospitals at Secunderabad and for agreeing to my visit to Madras, Bombay, and the 19th Indian Division. . . .

The 19th Indian Division were in grand form, and I do not think I have ever seen better looking Indian or Gurkha battalions than in this division.

I visited all four hospitals at Secunderabad, Nos. 127, 128, 134 and 137 I.B.G.H. There is no doubt that these are four of the finest military hospitals in the world. The buildings are ideal, the gardens and grounds are lovely, and the new operating theatres, X-ray rooms, dispensaries, etc. are thoroughly first-class. I asked both the British and Indian sick and wounded how they were getting on and whether they were being properly looked after and received most enthusiastic replies in every case. . . .

I realize that it is inevitable that the hospitals should be rather

specially cleaned up for such a visit, but in the case of the hospital ship *Kaora*, which happened to come into Madras while I was in the port, there could have been no preliminary preparation, as I went on board without warning, and found the conditions there were good.

The one main complaint at each hospital and on board the hospital ship was the shortage of nurses. I was told that the over-all shortage exceeded fifty per cent, and each of the four matrons I spoke to said they would have given anything to have had V.A.D.s [Voluntary Aid Detachment].

I think I told you that Edwina<sup>1</sup> wrote to me some while ago, saying that if we were really quick in applying for the rest of the V.A.D.s she would see that we got them, but that if it was left for a few weeks it would probably be too late. Do you not think it would be a good plan to telegraph now for the extra V.A.D.s, and if you will let me know how many (1,000?) I will also telegraph to her. . . .

Anyway, I wanted you to know how tremendously encouraged I was by all I saw at Secunderabad and how grateful I am to you for having invited me to go there.

The Commander-in-Chief passed this letter to the Principal Administrative Officer for comment.

*General Lindsell to General Auchinleck*

*18 October 1944*

. . . Shortage of nurses is now thirty per cent of British establishment and eighty per cent of Indian establishment. I think all possible action has been taken and we cannot expect much relief in trained nurses until war in Europe is over. We can absorb many more V.A.D.s and I think we should hammer away at this. I will consult A.G. and D.M.S. as to our total capacity for absorption.

In the middle of October that crusted character, General Stilwell, was recalled to the United States. He had quarrelled irrevocably with Chiang Kai-Shek, the Chinese Generalissimo, to whom he was Chief of Staff,<sup>2</sup> and whom he called both in public and in private 'the Peanut'. Harshly critical as he was of 'limeys', there was one 'limey', at least, to whom 'Vinegar Joe' could write a letter as heart-warming as this:

<sup>1</sup> Lady Louis Mountbatten (later the Countess Mountbatten of Burma), who was then Superintendent-in-Chief, St. John Ambulance Brigade.

<sup>2</sup> He was also Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, S.E.A.C., and Commanding General U.S. Army Forces, China, Burma, India.

My dear Auchinleck,

This is good-bye to you and Lady Auchinleck, with my very best wishes for the future. The sheriff has caught up with me, and I have been yanked out, but whatever my glaring deficiencies as a diplomat, I hope you will remember me, as I remember you, as a friend, and that we will meet again, as you have promised, in California.

Sincerely,  
J. W. STILWELL.

\* \* \*

As the war entered its sixth and final year, the matter of the repatriation of British officers, N.C.O.s and other ranks became, in both India and South-East Asia Commands, a major issue. It affected military efficiency and individual and unit morale. It was seldom absent from men's thoughts. Regulars and non-regulars alike brooded on it far too frequently. The majority of them had indeed been overseas a very long time, serving under conditions far worse than any that were experienced in Europe or the Middle East. They regarded themselves as 'the Forgotten Army' long before Stuart Emeny, the war correspondent of the *News Chronicle* (who was killed with Wingate when his aircraft crashed in the jungle on 24 March 1944) publicized the phrase in a despatch. They were not in fact forgotten, but they had been low on the priority list for many years. Amenities, from the British other ranks' viewpoint, were for long non-existent. Mail had been chaotic and involved in an administrative muddle which led to delays of six to nine months in delivery. Clubs, canteens and cinemas were rarities; leave facilities were few and costly. All these inadequacies both Commands made, in 1943-4, strenuous efforts to repair from their own resources. But deepest of all privations was the long absence from home.

Slim's words on this theme were just and charitable, as well as true:

In their months' old newspapers from home they read of the unfaithfulness of soldiers' wives, and saw pictures of English girls gambolling in the harvest fields with Italian prisoners. They heard that men on other fronts got home leave. Their own newspaper, *Seac*, was full of articles and letters urging the return home of men with long service in South-East Asia. They heard of protests and read of promises by distant politicians that their experience and their common sense made them doubt. . . . When I asked a man in his foxhole or sitting beside the track what he was, he would often,



instead of answering, 'I am a Lancashire Fusilier', 'an F.O.O.'s signaller', or 'the Bren gunner of this section', say, 'I am four and two', or 'three and ten'. He meant that was the number of years and months he had served in the Far East, and the unspoken question in his eyes was, 'How many more?' I could not answer him. The British officers, N.C.O.s and privates who had served longest were our key men. If we sent them home without replacement, neither our British nor our Indian formations could continue to fight efficiently.

It was not for want of representations by their commanders, from the Supreme Commander downwards, that these men remained; their replacement was out of our hands. That being so, it would have been wiser and kinder if we had confined ourselves to doing all we could to speed up repatriation—as indeed we did—and everything possible to discourage so much talk about it. Yet, when all was said and done, we still had men with four and even five years in the East without leave home, and that is trying a man higher than he should be tried.<sup>1</sup>

The authorities in the United Kingdom took the unworthy and distasteful course of trying to put the blame on the accustomed scapegoat, India Command. Auchinleck's patience was, this time, tried too far. He addressed to Lord Wavell one of the strongest memoranda he ever wrote.

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

*8 December 1944*

I feel that in their anxiety, for reasons connected with politics, to mollify public opinion in the United Kingdom, both the Secretary of State for War and the Adjutant-General are not being fair to us out here. In fact I would go so far as to say they seem to have adopted a definite policy of placing the responsibility and blame for any unpleasant or awkward situations, such as are now arising with increasing frequency, especially in connexion with manpower questions, on India.

I know that this is a serious accusation to make, and I would not make it did I not think that something must be done to check this tendency, which promises to make my own situation as C.-in-C. extremely difficult if not impossible.

I am responsible for keeping the Army in S.E.A. and India Commands up to strength so that it can function with the requisite efficiency to defeat the enemy.

<sup>1</sup> *Defeat Into Victory* by Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, pp. 520-1.

If it is necessary for this purpose to retain officers and men beyond the period fixed by the War Office for their repatriation, then this must be done and H.M.G. must accept the necessity, or acquiesce in the retardation of operations against the enemy and the probable prolongation of the war. They can not have it both ways and the responsibility is theirs, not yours or mine or the Supreme Allied Commander's.

I must emphasize that in all these matters I work hand in glove with the S.A.C. and General Leese<sup>1</sup> and no step affecting the holding back of officers or men is taken without mutual consultation and agreement.

This raises another question which needs to be brought home to the Secretary of State and the Adjutant-General to the Forces.

They are prone to omit all reference to the joint responsibility of S.E.A.C. with India in these matters and are tending more and more to mention India alone as being 'the nigger in the woodpile'. This is symptomatic in my opinion of their apparent general attitude towards us in India to which I take strong objection.

As Your Excellency will gather from the copies of telegrams submitted with my note, little or no attention is paid to representations by us as to the form or matter of statements to be made by the Secretary of State for War. In fact, the Secretary of State in his most recent utterance on December 5 has attributed statements to me which I never made and which place me in a ridiculous and completely false position, apart from omitting entirely any explanation as to the position of S.E.A.C. in this matter.

It is I think imperative that the public in the United Kingdom should be authoritatively informed with the least possible delay of the true situation, which, put briefly, is that war can not be carried out without men and that trained leaders and soldiers can not be taken away without prior replacement from formations engaged with the enemy without jeopardizing the success of the operations in progress.

I attach a suggested draft telegram which you might care to send to the Secretary of State should you consider this is justified by the situation.

Should Your Excellency decide to send a telegram, may I suggest that a copy of it should go to Mountbatten.

Mountbatten himself was keenly aware of the magnitude of his Command's debt to India Command, of the churlish and shabby

<sup>1</sup> Gen. Sir Oliver Leese had succeeded Gen. Giffard as C.-in-C. Allied Land Forces, S.E. Asia.

way in which India Command was habitually treated by high authority, and of the resentment which this attitude provoked. He did his utmost to bring about a change.

*Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to General Auchinleck 16 March 1945*

I am most grateful to you for having given me the opportunity of addressing the senior officers of the three Services in G.H.Q., India. . . .

I hope you realized that I meant most sincerely every word I said about India Command. I have said it now to the Prime Minister, the Chiefs of Staff, the Minister of Information, and to every other possible person and felt it was high time that I should also say it to the people most concerned. . . .

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Auchinleck had the time and the opportunity now to ponder one or two long-term themes. The strange and slightly sinister trance which had enveloped India's political life since the disturbances of August 1942 and the imprisonment of the Congress leaders began to break early in 1945. While it was clear that the war in Europe was likely to end within a few months, it was generally held—except in the small circle of those who were aware of the development of the atomic bomb—that the war in the Far East would be prolonged for a year or more. In March 1945 the Viceroy of India was summoned home for consultations with the Government of the United Kingdom. Here too there was a growing awareness of forthcoming political change, and there was a desire that India, as the main base for the massive campaigns which it was intended to mount in South-East Asia, should have a stable, and as far as possible genuinely representative, administration.

Lord Wavell's consultations were protracted. Not long after they began Auchinleck addressed a communication to him on a matter which was important and germane to the discussions with the Government. It was the first time that this topic was raised at a responsible level, and the solution which Auchinleck propounded was, in many respects, little different from that which was ultimately reached.

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

*28 March 1945*

As you know, we are considering very closely and carefully the possible post-war composition of the Army, and my Reorganization Committee is working hard at this now.

One of the most difficult problems is undoubtedly the future of the Gurkha units of the Indian Army, in view of the constitutional changes probable in the future.

There has been some discussion on this subject between the War Department and the External Affairs Department, and I understand Caroe<sup>1</sup> showed the file to you before I had had an opportunity of expressing a considered opinion on the matter.

As the matter may become one of considerable importance, I think you should know my views and I therefore send you a copy of a note embodying them. You may wish to discuss them with the Secretary of State for India.

The enclosure read as follows:

The Reorganization Committee (India) are considering the future of the Indian Army, and recently asked for guidance as to the assumptions they should make regarding the future of the Gurkha elements in the Indian Army. They have for the present been instructed to make alternative recommendations, on the assumptions:

(a) That Gurkha units will be available to the Indian Army as in the past, and

(b) That they will not be available for the Indian Army, though Nepalese manpower might be available for the Empire as a whole.

2. It is assumed that at a fairly early date India will receive some form of self-government and will enter into treaty relations by which some responsibility for the defence of the country will remain with H.M.G. It is also assumed that a national Indian Government will wish to fill the officer ranks of the Indian Army with Indians at as early a date as possible.

3. The attitude which a national Indian Government might take on the question of the continuation of the Gurkha rifle regiments can only be a matter of speculation, but there are extremes somewhere between which their decision is likely to lie. On the one hand, it can be argued that there will be plenty of proved fighting material available in India and that there will be hot competition for the privilege of serving in the Army, as there was before the war. In such circumstances, it may be argued, with every community pressing its own claims for recruitment, it would be politically impossible for a national Government to recruit

<sup>1</sup> Mr. (later Sir Olaf) Caroe was at this time Secretary of the External Affairs Department.

foreigners and thus take bread from the mouths of Indians. Gurkhas will therefore not be needed in the future Indian Army.

4. Another point of view is that the future Government will realize that the destinies of India and Nepal are inevitably linked and that the fighting strength of the Gurkhas is bound to be a factor in the balance of power of the sub-continent. India will therefore wish to retain the friendship of Nepal, and to control this source of recruitment. The Indian Government must be assumed to have competent military advice, and will realize that in order to recruit Gurkhas in war, they must also recruit them in peace. They will therefore wish to continue the recruitment of Gurkhas, whom they do not regard entirely as foreigners.

5. If the eventual decision lies between these two extremes, there will be a demand by the Indian Army for Gurkhas, but in reduced numbers. This would mean the disbandment of a number of Gurkha battalions and would increase the surplus of manpower available from Nepal in peace. Nepal will wish this surplus to be employed, since her economic well-being depends largely on the Gurkha regiments.

6. At the same time, His Majesty's Government will probably be faced by a shortage of manpower for their many Army commitments overseas. For some time at any rate after the war they will have to keep considerable garrisons in the Far East, and it is not clear that the Indian Army will always be able to provide all the assistance which H.M.G. will require. It might, therefore, well be that H.M.G. would be glad to continue to recruit Gurkhas towards their overseas garrison commitments. This would be convenient, because the one country has a surplus of manpower which the other requires; and it would be in accordance with the sentiments of both peoples. H.M.G. owes a debt of gratitude to Nepal for the assistance given in two major wars; while there can be no doubt of the friendship of Nepal to H.M.G. repeatedly stated in treaties and proved in time of war.

7. It is important that these considerations should be laid without delay before H.M.G. since they are making their plans for the post-war strength of the British Army and the garrisoning of the Far East. On the other hand we ought not in any way to anticipate a decision which must be taken by the new Government, who might regard any pre-judging of the issue at the best as a rebuff and at the worst as an attempt to keep in our own hands an important factor in the post-war situation in India. It is recommended, therefore, that H.M.G. should be told that while we can only guess at what the future Government may decide, it

docs seem that they may require fewer Gurkhas than the pre-war Army in India, and that there may therefore be a surplus available for employment by H.M.G. All we can ask at the present stage would be that H.M.G. should take this into account and should state whether they would be prepared to employ Gurkhas in any way, and if so up to how many.

8. There are two subsidiary points, one or the other of which at least will have to be tackled if Gurkhas are to continue to be employed outside Nepal. If Gurkhas are to be included in the Indian Army, they will certainly have to agree to be officered by Indians. Nepal might perhaps agree to this if at the same time they were offered training and employment in the Indian Army (not only in Gurkha battalions) for Nepalese officers. If, on the other hand, or in addition, they are to be employed by H.M.G. they would have to agree to serving overseas in peace time and the religious scruples of the priests on this score would have to be overcome. There are some grounds for believing that both these difficulties could be overcome, since the Durbar are likely to realize that their economic interests depend on a change of attitude. They must already be thinking of the future and wondering what it has to hold for them in this question of recruitment, which to them is all-important.

#### 9. *Conclusions*

(a) The first and immediate step is to inform H.M.G. of the problem and to ask whether H.M.G. are prepared to employ Gurkha soldiers under the Crown in their post-war forces, should the full twenty Gurkha battalions of the pre-war Indian Army not be required in the Defence Forces of India.

(b) When the views of H.M.G. are known, it will be necessary to consider the timing and method of an approach to Nepal regarding the possibility of Gurkhas serving overseas in peace time.

(c) It will also be necessary at some stage to open the question of officering any Gurkha battalions remaining in the post-war Indian Army.

Four weeks after he sent this document to the Viceroy, Auchinleck was himself summoned home to join in the discussions. He left Delhi on April 28 and arrived at Northolt on May 3. The war in the West was nearly at an end. Wavell and Auchinleck, who had played no small part in bringing about the imminent victory, were almost forgotten men outside the small circles of those with whom they were engaged in private conclave.

On the evening of May 10 Auchinleck came out of the India Office, went down the steps past Clive's statue, and turned to walk along the path on the outer edge of St. James's Park. Across the Horse Guards Parade and the road beneath the windows of the Foreign Office there was a huge, rejoicing throng of soldiers and civilians. Their joy was decorously and soberly expressed. Those who were old enough to remember the first Armistice Day in 1918 were aware of an immense difference in the temper and character of the British people across the years.

An officer who had served on the staff in G.H.Q. India for two years under both Wavell and Auchinleck, who had a month before been repatriated 'after long and continuous service overseas' and was on leave in London, was in this throng. Across the swirl of people in the warm dusk he saw the Commander-in-Chief.

'There's the Auk,' he said. 'I served under him.' He tried to cross the road to hail and salute the man whom he still thought of as the Chief. A group of young sailors, airmen and W.A.A.F.s, with arms linked, amiably blocked the way. Auchinleck strode purposefully on and was lost to sight near the Guards' War Memorial. The officer turned back to his companions, remembering the first time, nearly five years before, when he had seen Auchinleck in the street of an English country town, with brigadiers sprinting at his behest.

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Auchinleck left London on May 26, and on his way back to his post he visited Indian formations in Italy, Greece, Egypt, the Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Persia. He reached Delhi on June 9. Wavell had been back four days. In their absence much had happened. Europe was in the convulsive aftermath of the war's end. In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party at its conference in May rejected Churchill's terms for a continuation of the Coalition until after the defeat of the Japanese; on May 25 its Labour members resigned from the Government. It was announced that a General Election would be held on July 5. Churchill formed a Conservative 'caretaker' Government; Amery, who was a strong advocate of rapid and radical constitutional reform in India, remained as Secretary of State. In Burma, Rangoon had been recaptured, and Slim's victorious forces—the bulk of which were now Indian, with Indian officers in command of units up to brigade strength—were mopping up the remaining Japanese forces, scattered but still resisting, in various parts of the country. In utter secrecy, the final preparations were being made for the first testing of the atomic bomb. On

June 14, against this storm-clouded background, the Viceroy announced his proposals for constitutional change within the framework of the Government of India Act of 1935.

Vast changes—not only political in character—were coming upon India, and it was no longer possible for the Indian Army to stand aloof from politics. It was now a huge, heterogeneous but national army; its small, devoted, much misunderstood and much abused cadre of pre-war British officers, three thousand in number, had steered it through this swift process of expansion and made it not only the largest volunteer army in history, but an efficient fighting machine without which Mountbatten's victories in South-East Asia would never have been possible. But like its British counterpart, the Indian Army was now an army of civilians in uniform. That its military standards had been nevertheless fully sustained, in spite of the carpings of critics like Churchill, was a major achievement, due in large measure to the high moral and mental quality of its regular pre-war British and Indian officers. But the price to be paid was heavy—not least in an involvement in Indian political life which, to many of its senior and more responsible British officers, was as distasteful as it was sad. Through the turmoil and the agony of the next two years these officers continued to discharge their duty without faltering. In their eyes the events through which they had to stand fast were not only the prelude to the end of their own professional careers—this was the factor which counted least of all—but the ruin of their whole world, the destruction of everything that they believed in and served. The thanks they got were little indeed; but the debt owed to them in their grief, their perplexity and the unstained honour of their service, by Britain and by the two succession States which were to emerge, was measureless.

Auchinleck's situation in this ordeal, which began as soon as the war ended, was tragically solitary. On his shoulders rested the full burden of politico-military decision. The least political of soldiers, he had to become a major political figure, second in importance only to the Viceroy himself. He was inevitably, therefore, the pivot of a fierce political battle between forces which were relentless in their opposition to one another, and far from tender with anybody who—however lofty and disinterested his motives—was mixed up in their fight.

And this was incomprehensible to the best and most faithful of his officers. They were the friends of a lifetime. He had served in their company in peace and war, as a regimental officer and in high command. They had gone up the ladder of promotion together. They had shared laughter and danger and sorrow. Theirs was no superficial



association, but a deep and binding brotherhood. He was to them the embodiment of the traditions, which they had inherited and enriched, of their common service. To their dismay they watched him, as they believed, set about the destruction of those traditions. It is no easy task to lay upon a good man that he should perplex the minds and break the hearts of those he loves most dearly.

That his private life and happiness should, at this time, be disrupted and destroyed was no small addition to the burden which he carried.

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The most notable political development on the Indian scene since the uprising of August 1942 had been the steady strengthening of the movement for Muslim separation, under the able and implacable leadership of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The Muslim League was by the summer of 1945 a political force in India second only to Congress. But Congress's leaders, because of their part in the August disturbances (not least Gandhi's slogan, 'Quit India'), had sojourned for nearly three years in prison. No such disability had been inflicted on Jinnah, whose claims now were far in advance of those put forward before the war by the older leaders of moderate Muslim nationalism. He now demanded total Muslim independence: his concept of nationhood was embodied in the word 'Pakistan'. In June 1945 the idea of Pakistan was no longer academic and remote: it had an urgent reality which the Congress leaders, perhaps as a consequence of their enforced isolation in prison, failed to recognize.

Jinnah saw the advantages of his position and seized them resolutely. The proposals which Wavell had brought back with him were described in London as 'an agreed national offer' on the part of Britain towards India. This was slightly disingenuous; there were real differences—not about the ultimate goal of Indian independence but about the methods by which this goal was to be attained—between the Conservative and Labour Parties. At the Labour Party conference in May Ernest Bevin had stated: 'If we are returned, we shall close the India Office and transfer this business to the Dominions,' thereby, in Indian eyes, pledging his party to Dominion status for India. Churchill might have been willing to accept radical alterations in India's special relationship to Britain; he was profoundly averse from destroying that relationship and substituting for it one of a quite different character. But that Wavell sincerely believed that he had national backing for his proposals there can be no doubt.

They were as follows: that the Viceroy's Executive Council should be reconstituted so that all its members, except the Viceroy and the Commander-in-Chief, would be Indian political leaders; that on the reconstituted Council Muslim and Caste Hindus should have equal representation; that, while the Viceroy's reserve powers could not be abandoned, they would not be exercised unreasonably; and that the portfolio of External Affairs, hitherto held by the Viceroy, would be transferred to an Indian member of the Council, and fully accredited persons would be appointed to represent India abroad. Lord Wavell expressed the hope that, with this reconstitution at the centre, the provincial ministries—Congress in their composition—which had withdrawn during the war, would resume office.

To enable him to carry out these proposals, the Viceroy announced that he would call a conference of party leaders, provincial Prime Ministers and former Prime Ministers, who would be asked to submit to him lists of names from which he could select his new Executive Council.

In a broadcast explanation of his plan to the people of India, Wavell said that the proposals embodied 'the utmost progress within the present constitution', but that none of them would 'in any way prejudice or prejudge the essential form of the future, permanent constitution or constitutions for India', which would be a matter for Indians themselves to frame.<sup>1</sup>

Amery on the same day announced in the House of Commons that all the members of the Congress Working Committee who were still in custody would be released. The committee went forthwith into session in Bombay, and decided to accept the Viceroy's invitation. A claim which the Muslim League had already put forward, that they should nominate the Muslim members of the Executive Council, the Working Committee emphatically rejected in advance.

On June 25 the conference assembled at Viceregal Lodge, Simla. It began in an atmosphere of optimism all round, which changed swiftly, except so far as Jinnah was concerned, to one of frustration and sadness. Jinnah proved to be immovable on the issue of the Muslim League's sole, prescriptive right to nominate all the Muslim members of the Executive Council; it in no way affected his rocklike stand that the chief representative of Congress, its President, Maulana Azad, was a Muslim; indeed, he refused to meet Azad, and the only Congress spokesman with whom he consented to deal was a Hindu, Pandit Pant.

After four days, perceiving that there was an absolute deadlock,

<sup>1</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru* by Frank Moraes, pp. 308-9.

Wavell adjourned the conference until July 14 for further informal consultations, and asked the party leaders to give him their lists of nominees for the Executive Council to enable him to make the final choice.

The Congress representatives complied, and their list of five included two Muslims, Maulana Azad and Asaf Ali (who was later to be India's first Ambassador to the United States). Jinnah, however, continued to insist that the League was alone empowered to nominate Muslims and that the five he chose should be accepted *en bloc*. Congress's opposition to this claim was not without support from outside its own ranks: the Muslim Prime Minister of the Punjab, Malik Khizr Hayat Khan, who led a 'Unionist' coalition consisting of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, demanded that one of the Muslim seats should be given to his nominee from his own province.

By July 7 Wavell had his lists from all the groups except the Muslim League. Jinnah did not budge. Wavell therefore prepared his own list, which included non-League Muslims. He showed Jinnah the names of the Muslims he had chosen: Jinnah said that they were unacceptable. Wavell said afterwards:

... He was so decided that I felt it would be useless to continue the discussion. In the circumstances I did not show my selections as a whole to Mr. Jinnah and there was no object in showing them to the other leaders. The conference has therefore failed.<sup>1</sup>

It terminated on July 14, nine days after the British General Election whose results (delayed because of the time required to collect the postal and proxy votes of the Forces serving overseas) were announced on July 26. The Labour Party had been given a majority over all other parties of 152.

Attlee, who became Prime Minister, had been a member of the Simon Commission on India in 1927, and had always retained a close interest in Indian affairs. Cripps, who had undertaken his Mission at Churchill's request in 1942, was appointed President of the Board of Trade. The Secretary of State for India was a veteran Socialist, educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, a pioneer supporter of the women's suffrage movement, named F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, who was immediately given a peerage.

Indian nationalists realized that complete independence could not be far away. 'We are very near our goal,' said Maulana Azad, 'and the next stage is the goal itself. It does not matter what the

<sup>1</sup> The *Statesman* (Calcutta), 26 July 1945, quoted in *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 302.

intentions of the British Government are.<sup>1</sup> This, in fact, was the mood of both Congress and the League in the next two years.

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*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

26 July 1945

I have been thinking for some time about a problem with which we shall be faced when the Indian soldier begins to go back in large numbers to the villages. In the first place, he will very often have become accustomed to a higher standard of living than anything within his experience before the war. In the second place, he will be used to a higher standard of administrative efficiency. I do not say this in criticism of the civil administration, least of all of individual civil officers. There is all the difference in the world between trying to administer a district of a million inhabitants with some half a dozen officers and looking after a battalion of some 800 men with twelve to sixteen officers. But however unfair, I think comparisons will be drawn by the soldier; and, in fact, most Indian soldiers while still in the ranks will express themselves freely to anyone they trust on the corruption and indifference of the civil subordinates whom they meet. The dissatisfaction which they felt even before the war is likely to be stronger after the war unless they find that a big change has taken place.

Although there are of course many admirable exceptions, I think there can be little doubt that there is a general indifference among the civil subordinate staff to the idea of any real progress. This, I suggest, is due partly to low pay, partly to the small numbers of higher officers available for supervision and partly I believe to the fact that many senior officers are cynical about the prospect of making any real change in the villager's way of life, while it has sometimes been the attitude even of Provincial Governments that the good district officer is the man who can successfully avoid any riots or civil disturbances while he is in the district.

There is nothing new in all this, but I want to emphasize that, when demobilization begins in earnest, we shall be unleashing on the villages a force which might be of great value, if handled properly, but which, if it is frustrated, may be definitely harmful. We have now collected in the Indian Army some 7,000-8,000 young officers who have been selected for their powers of leader-

<sup>1</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru* by Frank Moracs, p. 310.

ship. There are also over 16,000 matriculates who are V.C.O.s, Warrant Officers, or N.C.O.s who are accustomed to giving orders and taking responsibility. Many of these will not be going back to the villages, but some will, and they can be very useful if used in the right way. I hope that most of them will find a place in the Provincial Governments' resettlement schemes. The mass of the men to be demobilized, however, will not have high standards of academic education but will be generally anxious to improve conditions in their villages. If they are frustrated by passive obstruction on the part of minor officials, or by mere inefficiency in administration, they might prove a real source of danger.

All this has led me to a much wider problem which is not strictly speaking my affair, and to which no doubt you have already given thought, but which I am sure you will not mind my raising. The question to my mind is whether we can achieve a real improvement in the standard of living in the villages without a radical change of heart and a great increase in the tempo and standards of the Civil Administration. I feel there is a danger of our not thinking big enough, and increasing the staff in Districts by say fifty per cent when we should be thinking in terms of 500 per cent. Admittedly suitable material for a 500 per cent increase in staff does not exist at present, but are we planning for something of this nature? And does not the change of heart which is required in the District Administration mean an increase in the use of publicity far beyond anything which (so far as I know) we are at present contemplating? It will need immense drive from the top to change the whole outlook of the Administration, so that it becomes a positive force for improving the standard of living instead of a framework with the mainly negative object of preventing crime, unrest or famine. As I have said, this is going a long way outside my own portfolio, and I know that it is a matter to which you and my colleagues have given thought, but I venture to write because I feel there is a real danger that we may limit our activity to planning for what can be done in the immediate future with the resources we foresee, instead of looking ahead and endeavouring to create the resources for a much bigger effort five or ten years later. It seemed to me that Your Excellency might care to discuss this point of view with Provincial Governors when they come here next month.

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy  
Future of the British Garrison in India*

22 August 1945

I am continually being impressed in the present rapidly changing

state of India with the urgent need of facing facts and for discarding the habit, prevalent for some time past in British official circles in India, of pretending that things are as they were ten or even five years ago.

We, that is the British officials in this country, can no longer refuse to answer awkward questions or brush aside pertinent if inconvenient enquiries as to our intentions and objects.

2. I feel that perhaps the first big question I shall be called upon to answer in my capacity as War Member of your Executive Council and Commander-in-Chief in India is why is it necessary to keep a British garrison in India at all, when it is the avowed intention of H.M.G. to give India self-government and in view of the fact that the cost of British troops is much greater than for the same number of Indian troops. I shall try to answer this question.

3. In the past, as we can now frankly admit, the primary and overriding reason for keeping British troops in India was to hold India for the British Government. Everyone knows this and it is no use denying it.

There were other subsidiary reasons, namely:

(a) The idea that a leavening of British troops was essential to stiffen the Indian troops used by the British to such a large extent in their many wars during the consolidation of the Empire. This idea goes back to the days of Sir Arthur Wellesley and beyond and was strongly held during the First World War and persisted well into the Second World War. It would be interesting to trace during the last hundred years the way in which the proportion of British to Indian troops in field formations has gradually and steadily lessened, but this need not be enlarged upon here.

Whether the idea can be supported by reliable evidence today is more than doubtful. Recently in Burma higher commanders have definitely preferred to use Indian units rather than British and have actually asked that British units should be replaced by Indian. There are no doubt special reasons for this state of affairs, but provided the standard of efficiency of the officers of the Indian Army is maintained at its present level, it would be extremely difficult to argue that an admixture of British troops is any longer necessary to provide a stiffening in battle for Indian troops. On the evidence available I could not myself support such a theory and I doubt if any of the higher commanders who have had recent experience in command of mixed formations would do so either.

(b) The need for British troops to put down communal disturbances if and when Indian troops, because of their religious feelings, proved unreliable for this purpose. There is little doubt that this need still persists or might arise in the event of communal strife on a large scale, such as might be brought about by an attempt to put the Pakistan idea into effect. However this may be, the question as to whether it is necessary to keep British troops in India for this sole purpose can only be decided by an autonomous or semi-autonomous Government of India for itself, and not by a British Government of India such as still exists or by H.M.G., unless it is to stultify its offer of self-government.

(c) The need to meet certain obligations to the Rulers of Indian States. This can hardly be used as an argument for the retention of a considerable body of British troops in India.

(d) The need to provide protection for airfields and ports of strategic importance to the Empire. Such protection would naturally be a responsibility of the Government of India as it is of the Government of any other self-governing Dominion. The British troops needed would be few in number and could only be retained by special agreement between H.M.G. and the Government of India for this specific purpose.

4. There is one other reason, which is that the continued association of British and Indian troops in the same formations, or, at any rate, in proximity to each other, so that they can work, play and train together, will ensure co-operation and understanding between the two armies in a future war, and maintain that close and valuable comradeship which has grown up by their having fought side by side in many wars in the past.

This is an intangible and imponderable advantage, though it is, in my opinion, a most important one.

It is, I think, the only logical reason which can be advanced for the retention of British troops in India in the future, unless, as I have pointed out, the future autonomous Government of India itself wishes to retain them to maintain its own stability.

5. I have put my views to you as I feel that it is necessary for us to define our policy in this matter and to be ready to state it. I shall be grateful if you will let me know your wishes.

6. You will notice that I have considered the question of the retention of British *units* only, and not that of the need for British personnel in Indian units. This is a separate question and is not, so far as I know, likely to cause any great difficulty, as the temporary need for them is generally recognized.

One highly placed servant of the Government at least was looking at the deeper problems implicit in the whirling campaign for Indian political freedom, and was seeking to offer constructive solutions.

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On August 15 Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. It took nearly a month to complete the formalities of the surrender in so far as it affected the vast areas of South-East Asia in which—apart altogether from the effects of the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—the Japanese had been utterly vanquished. On September 12, in Singapore, Admiral Mountbatten, accompanied by his Commanders-in-Chief and principal staff officers, received the total surrender of all Japanese forces, land, sea and air, in South-East Asia.

An inevitable and not unexpected corollary of this surrender provoked, in the succeeding months, a major political explosion in India, in which Auchinleck was directly implicated. For involved in the surrender were the remnants of the Indian forces which, in the course of the war, had been raised and trained under Japanese supervision and control in order to take part in the campaign against the Allies in South-East Asia. These forces bore the name, 'The Indian National Army'.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### The I.N.A. Trials

THE deeply distressing and complex problem of the Indian National Army was the product and consequence of the British defeat in South-East Asia in 1942. When Singapore fell in February of that year some 85,000 men, the remainder of the British forces in Malaya, surrendered to the Japanese. Of these nearly 60,000 were Indians—officers, V.C.O.s, N.C.O.s and other ranks.

In the course of their captivity rather under half of this number, about 25,000, were by one means or another seduced from their sworn allegiance to join a force which took the name of the Indian National Army and, under Japanese control but commanded in all subordinate formations by Indian officers, bore arms against the Allied forces in South-East Asia from the winter of 1943-4 onwards.

Any assessment of their actions, and of the effects which they had during the war and afterwards, must take into consideration the fact that 35,000 prisoners of war in Japanese hands stood by the oath they had taken and the salt they had eaten. They took unflinchingly the road of hardship, privation, humiliation, torture and death rather than betray the standards of their own honour and loyalty. Those of them who died—and there were many—lie in graves all over the area of Japanese conquest alongside their British, Australian, Dutch and American comrades. The memory of their courage and endurance shines brightly on a sombre scene.

But to understand how and why they stood firm is to begin to comprehend how and why the minority, those who joined the I.N.A., did not. The loyalty of the Indian soldier was of an intensely personal character; its focus was his officer, his company commander; the widest extent of its perimeter was his regiment. His outlook can best be likened to that of a legionary in the Roman Empire, not in the period of its expansion but in the long centuries of its consolidation and decline—a legionary recruited in an area on the Empire's outer edge, Britain, western Gaul, North Africa or Syria, to whom Rome was a remote and hazy concept, whose loyalty therefore was bounded

by the horizon of the legion. Such, in large measure, were the yeomen volunteer soldiers of the Indian Army.

There was one significant difference, however: there were in a legion on the outer marches of the Roman Empire few, if any, officers of pure Roman stock; in 1939 the great majority of officers of the Indian Army, and all those of any seniority, were British. The process of Indianization was nowhere near half complete when the Second World War began. In December 1941 the opening of the Far Eastern war found the Indian Army in the throes of sudden expansion; its most seasoned units were fighting, under Auchinleck's command, in the Middle East. Two Australian divisions were hurried out of the Middle East to defend their homeland. The Indians, like the New Zealanders, stayed.

The formations which were poured into Malaya and Burma went into a campaign for which they had not been trained and for which they were thoroughly ill-equipped. When the surrender came in Singapore, the Japanese separated officers and men, not because this was in accordance with the Geneva Convention (for which the Japanese had no regard), but for purposes of their own.

The Japanese had long been aware of Indian nationalism; though whether they understood it much better than the Germans understood Irish or Scottish nationalism, or some of the British who meddled in Balkan affairs understood Greek or Serbian nationalism, is questionable. In the large and diverse Indian civilian communities in South-East Asia there were many prominent supporters of the nationalist movement in their own country. Even before the fall of Singapore the Japanese sought means of exploiting, for politico-military purposes, their Indian prisoners of war.

In a Sikh officer of the 1/14 Punjab Regiment, Captain Mohan Singh, captured in northern Malaya in December 1941, they found, as they thought, a suitable instrument and figurehead. When the mass surrenders occurred, Mohan Singh was put in command of all Indian prisoners who accepted the inducements, and were persuaded by the arguments offered to them, to forswear their allegiance and join an army which, they were told, would go forward alongside its Japanese allies and liberate India from her alien oppressors.

It is not necessary to trace here the full history of the I.N.A. in subsequent years;<sup>1</sup> it suffices to say that the Japanese made lavish promises to Mohan Singh; that they signally failed to fulfil these promises; that Mohan Singh, deeply disillusioned, resigned and withdrew all connexion with the organization, and that the I.N.A.

<sup>1</sup> It is recounted in detail in *The Springing Tiger* by Hugh Toye.

then languished. It was refashioned in 1943 by a man of much more powerful character and radical opinions than Mohan Singh, and of considerable stature and reputation in the Indian nationalist movement—Subhas Chandra Bose. Bose was a Bengali, educated at Calcutta University and Cambridge, who passed fourth into the Indian Civil Service and resigned from it in order to devote himself to the nationalist cause. He was an intellectual with a passion for violence, considerable qualities of personal leadership, flamboyant and dictatorial, in character, temperament and outlook remarkably similar to many leaders of nationalist, independence movements which arose in Ireland, Asia and Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. He quarrelled with Gandhi on the issue of non-violence. In January 1941, while awaiting trial on a charge of sedition in Calcutta, he escaped, made his way across India to Afghanistan, thence to Moscow and, in March, to Berlin; in June 1943, after an eighteen-week journey in a German U-boat, he reached Tokyo.

He was self-confident and persuasive. He was not oppressed by the melancholy inner torments of a Roger Casement, but had the hard, brash bounciness of a Baillie-Stewart or a Joyce. On 21 October 1943, by permission of the Japanese, Bose proclaimed the Provisional Government of Free India—Azad Hind—with himself as Head of State, Commander-in-Chief of the I.N.A., War Minister and Foreign Minister. Three days later he declared war on Britain and the U.S.A. Financed by special taxation levied on the Indian communities of South-East Asia, he established a large, corrupt and markedly inefficient bureaucracy on Nazi lines, appointed a Cabinet of thirteen Ministers and sent diplomatic envoys to the Axis Powers and puppet States. The title by which he chose to be known, Netaji—‘dear Spiritual Leader’—was significant.

The re-establishment of the I.N.A. was what the Japanese most wanted from Bose, and—ambitious, unstable and vainglorious as he was—he was far from unwilling to comply with their requests. Out of the total originally recruited in 1942 by Mohan Singh, the Japanese military authorities permitted only one combatant division, numbering some 16,000 men, to be raised. The surplus, whom they described as ‘unabsorbed volunteers’, reverted to the status of prisoners of war. In December 1942, when Mohan Singh gave up his command, 4,000 of these 16,000 withdrew with him.

When Subhas Chandra Bose, sent on from Tokyo, arrived in Singapore towards the end of 1943, therefore, the I.N.A. consisted of some 12,000 disgruntled and perplexed men. His prestige, his fiery oratory, his promises and his money recruited from among the ranks

of the Indian P.O.W.s some 10,000 fresh volunteers, and from the Indian civilian community in Malaya and Singapore about 20,000.

One division, in strength between 14,000 and 15,000 strong, fought on the Japanese side in the Burma campaigns of 1944 and 1945. The role which the Japanese enforced on them was in part propaganda (which was not at all successful), and in part that of a guerilla or skirmishing formation (which they fulfilled half-heartedly). They had no aircraft, no artillery, no heavy mortars, no tanks or armoured cars: they were light infantry, issued with captured British rifles and equipment of 1941 pattern.

In every recorded clash between British and Indian forces and the I.N.A. in Burma, the I.N.A. were worsted. Their leadership was far from inspiring: three officers in all were killed in battle, one was killed by a Japanese sentry and one died in an air crash. By the time of the final Japanese defeat in Burma, 750 of the I.N.A. had been killed in action, 1,500 had died of disease or starvation, 2,000 had escaped to Siam, and 3,000 had surrendered or deserted. 9,000 were captured.

\* \* \*

During the war the Indian public knew little or nothing of the I.N.A. The Army, however, was fully aware of their existence. They were described officially as 'Jifs' (Japanese Indian Forces). As they began to surrender or were captured in battle from May 1944 onwards, they were brought back to India, segregated, sent to rehabilitation centres, and graded in categories according to the gravity of such offences as were known against them.<sup>1</sup> The existence of the I.N.A. was treated as a military matter, a problem of morale and discipline within the established framework of the Indian Army. Before the end of the war some thirty V.C.O.s, N.C.O.s and senior sepoys, who had been captured in battle or trying to enter India by submarine or parachute, were tried by court-martial; of these, only nine, all of whom had undertaken espionage or sabotage missions, were executed.

The end of the war brought the matter of the I.N.A. to the forefront in a quite different guise. It was no longer a confidential

<sup>1</sup> There were three categories: 'black', those whose loyalty was proved to have been permanently affected, who were whole-hearted adherents of the I.N.A. and were a danger to security; 'grey', those whose loyalty was temporarily affected as a result of joining the I.N.A., but who proved to be only lukewarm adherents and took no active part in the movement; 'white', those who joined the I.N.A. but by their subsequent conduct were exonerated from any act of disloyalty other than that of joining that organization.

military issue; and the circumstances of the war's end gave it a spectacular and melodramatic quality which was enhanced by the fact that Bose was killed when a Japanese military aircraft in which he was flying from Singapore to Tokyo crashed in Formosa on 18 August 1945.

The Government of India, announcing his death in a communiqué issued in New Delhi on the following day, also made public a few of the basic facts about the I.N.A. It was claimed by one of Nehru's biographers long afterwards that the I.N.A. became at once 'a dramatic symbol of national unity'.<sup>1</sup>

That great symbolical significance was attached to the I.N.A., and that a great tide of emotional excitement about it swept the country, are facts which cannot be denied. How rapid was this process and how spontaneous?

Nehru's part in it was important. After the breakdown of the Simla conference he went off to have a holiday in Kashmir, where 'he spent a month on a trek to the higher regions and passes, amid the glaciers and snow, and returned to India exhilarated in heart and spirits'.<sup>2</sup>

On August 19, however, he was in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, and when he was interviewed there and asked his views about the I.N.A. he replied:

I was of the opinion and am still of the opinion that the leaders and others of this Army had been misguided in many ways and had failed to appreciate the larger consequences of their unfortunate association with the Japanese. Three years ago I was asked in Calcutta what I would do if Subhas Bose led an army into India on the plea of liberating India. I replied that I would not hesitate to resist this invasion even though I did not doubt that Subhas Bose and his Indian colleagues were motivated by the desire to free India and were in no way tools of the Japanese. Nevertheless, they had put themselves on the wrong side and were functioning under Japanese auspices. Therefore, whatever the motive behind these people, they had to be resisted in India or outside.

The following day Nehru spoke again:

Now a very large number of officers and soldiers of the I.N.A. . . . are prisoners and some at least have been executed. . . . At any

<sup>1</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru* by Frank Moraes, p. 311.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

time it would have been wrong to treat them too harshly, but at this time—when it is said big changes are impending in India—it would be a very grave mistake leading to far-reaching consequences if they were treated just as ordinary rebels. The punishment given them would in effect be a punishment on all India and all Indians and a deep wound would be created in millions of hearts.<sup>1</sup>

The vast majority of former members of the I.N.A. were certainly not treated as 'ordinary rebels', but with the utmost lenience and generosity. The Government of India announced that there would be no attempt to punish the rank and file, and that only the leaders and those charged with atrocities would be court-martialled.

At first, Congress's reaction was mildly favourable, but the political opportunity presented a temptation too strong to be resisted. Here the traditional separation between the Indian intellectual and politician and the Indian Army worked to the ultimate disadvantage of both. Congress knew little or nothing about the Army; the senior serving British officers of the Army, aware of their own deep affection for the regiments in which they had spent the happiest years of their lives, and utterly convinced that they had served India and the Indian people conscientiously and loyally, had no understanding of or liking for the civilian politicians. The generals strove to preserve and to hand on the Indian Army they knew. The politicians saw and seized a chance to whip up and exploit popular animosity to British rule on a scale never possible before and in quite a new arena.

Even before the details of such proceedings as might be taken were made public, Congress began its campaign. In mid-September the All-India Congress Committee passed a resolution to the effect that 'it would be a tragedy if these officers, men and women, were punished for the offence of having laboured, however mistakenly, for the freedom of India. . . . The A.I.C.C. therefore earnestly trusts that they will be released.' It then set up a Defence Committee to handle the cases of I.N.A. soldiers and members of the Indian Independence League, the organization which had backed and financed the I.N.A. under the Japanese occupation of South-East Asia.

The members of this Defence Committee were some of the ablest lawyers in the country: Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, a venerable and greatly venerated Liberal, who had attended the London Round Table Conference in 1931 as one of India's leading spokesmen;

<sup>1</sup> *The Springing Tiger* by Hugh Toye, p. 171.

Nehru himself; Asaf Ali; Dr. Katju, whose son had been killed in action fighting against the Japanese two years earlier; and Bhulabhbhai Desai, who was the Congress leader in the Central Legislative Assembly.

In October it was announced that initially, three officers of the I.N.A. would be put on trial, and that the court-martial would be held in public during the following month in the Red Fort in Delhi. The choice of the Red Fort was made partly on practical grounds, partly on symbolical. Those members of the I.N.A. who had been kept in custody were held for interrogation in the Red Fort. It was only a few miles from G.H.Q., its approaches could be guarded, yet it was easy of access. But it was also the palace of the Moghul Emperors, the visible emblem of the greatness of India's past. On the wide parade-ground in front of its main gates the Viceroy had, at two recent and impressive ceremonies, presented Victoria Crosses to soldiers of the Indian Army.

The three officers court-martialled were all regular holders of the King's commission. The senior was Captain Shah Nawaz of the 1/14 Punjab Regiment, a former winner of the Sword of Honour at the Indian Military Academy. He had held the rank of 'major-general' in the I.N.A. and had commanded a division in Burma in 1945. Captain P. K. Saghal, of the 2/10 Baluch Regiment, and Lieutenant G. S. Dhillon, of the 1/14 Punjab Regiment, had been battalion commanders in Shah Nawaz's division. They were all three charged with murder, with abetment of murder, and with waging war against the King-Emperor.

The political hullabaloo now rose to unprecedented heights. Congress denounced the trial as 'an act of savage oppression'.

The I.N.A. was eulogized . . . in the most fulsome terms of its own propaganda: its object was the same as that of Congress itself, and its sufferings were in the same cause.<sup>1</sup>

Nehru, so sensible and so moderate in the cool, bracing atmosphere of Kashmir two months earlier, was now beside himself with excitement. He said of the I.N.A. officers, 'Whatever their failings and mistakes . . . they are a fine body of young men . . . and their dominating motive was India's freedom.' He said that he would welcome the trial of alleged war criminals, but added, 'in my list there will be many officials sitting in Delhi'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Nehru, *A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 306.

Nehru's conviction that the only motive of the I.N.A. officers had been a passion for Indian freedom might have been shaken had he realized that one of the arguments which they used most frequently in trying to convert their former comrades was the assurance of good treatment and good rations and escape from the privations of life as prisoners of war. They used it again and again on one Indian officer who endured eighty-eight days in a cage rather than change his allegiance.

But considerations such as these had no impact in October 1945. The I.N.A. Defence Committee bustled into action. Their first move was an appeal to the Viceroy, asking for the postponement, if not the abandonment, of the trial.

*General Auchinleck to Sir Evan Jenkins*<sup>1</sup>

20 October 1945

The chief point in this application is that 'the alleged offence primarily concerns the Indian people' and that before these accused officers are tried 'the wishes of the people of India should be ascertained and given effect to'. Therefore the trials, if not abandoned, should be postponed until, following the elections next year, the Executive Council has been reconstituted, popular Ministries have begun to function in the Provinces and the new Legislatures have had an opportunity of expressing their opinion. In other words, the Government of India should lay aside its responsibility for the administration of justice for some six months.

There may be many matters on which it would be improper for Government to commit its successors, but the impartial administration of justice is of the very essence of Government and must continue from day to day under the law. The practical objections to holding up the consideration of some thousands of cases are obvious.

There can be no doubt that Japan and its satellites would have recognized as a Government every party of saboteurs which burnt down a railway station or a police station in 1942, and there is as good a case for postponing the trial of offences committed in India in pursuance of the 'quit India' campaign or any other anti-Government offences as there is for holding up these I.N.A. trials.

I notice that the petitioners state that the three accused officers have formally entrusted their defence before the court-martial to the I.N.A. Defence Committee. This is not accurate: the fact is that the defence has been entrusted to three individual members of

<sup>1</sup> Private Secretary to the Viceroy.



the committee. Obviously we could not contemplate admitting a committee to the Red Fort as legal advisers, and certainly an accused person cannot be represented before a court by a committee.

I advise that the application be rejected on the ground that the administration of justice cannot properly be held up in the manner proposed by the committee.

The Government set its face against abandonment or postponement of the courts-martial, but permitted the assemblage of a tremendous array of defending counsel for the three accused when the proceedings began in the Red Fort on November 5. There were seventeen advocates in the court-room, including Nehru, wearing the barrister's gown which he had not donned for thirty years.

But the defence's leading counsel was Bhulabhbhai Desai, whose 'brilliant scorching advocacy and cross-examination rang a bell throughout India'.<sup>1</sup> He argued that the I.N.A. was the military force of a properly constituted government, which the accused had joined as true patriots.

'The honour and the law of the Indian National Army are on trial before this court,' he thundered, 'and the right to wage war on the part of a subject nation for their liberation.'

To the prosecution's contention that the officers had broken their oath of allegiance he retorted, 'Unless you sell your own soul, how can you ever say, when you are fighting to liberate your own country, that there is some other allegiance which prevents you from doing so? If that were so, there would be nothing but permanent slavery.'

This distinguished lawyer talked as freely out of the court-room as in it. A senior Indian officer, working in G.H.Q., met him in the Chelmsford Club on the evening of November 15, when the trial had been going on for ten days. He sent Auchinleck his notes on the encounter:

During the conversation the main topic was the I.N.A. and the forthcoming trials.

Mr. Bhulabhbhai Desai did most of the talking during his one hour's stay. Following points were discussed. . . .

He mentioned that the I.N.A. trials have given them the best weapon they ever had for their propaganda and that if any of these are executed, it will only make them the greatest martyrs India has ever had, and he continued that as things are going now

<sup>1</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru* by Frank Moraes, p. 312.

it may lead to armed revolution. To this one of the party asked how there can be an armed revolution when there are no arms. He replied there are people who are always willing to supply them.

When I said, How are you going to reconcile those prisoners of war and other Indian soldiers who had suffered and fought not only the Japs but the I.N.A. and who demand that the guilty I.N.A. personnel must be tried, he replied that they have been tutored to say so.

I again asked if he thought those responsible for tortures and murders of our soldiers should not be tried. He replied that so far the main line of trial is for joining the I.N.A. and fighting against the King and not so much for tortures, etc.

During the conversation he said the formation of the I.N.A. and their work have proved to the country that the Indians can train and command the Army, because according to him 300 personnel of I.N.A. trained some 1,200 officers who in turn trained an army of 60,000 in short time which fought and nearly succeeded in capturing Kohima. . . .

During the conversation it was mentioned how is not Government doing something in stopping the trials. Mr. Bhulabhbhai replied that he has been told by reliable authority that the C.-in-C. is the person who is insisting on these trials; and to which I replied that he was mistaken as the C.-in-C. in such affairs is guided by his advisers.

While the proceedings against the three main offenders were still going on, urgent consideration was given in G.H.Q. and elsewhere to the methods of dealing with those still to be tried. In late November Auchinleck called a conference of Army commanders in Delhi. Not only had the I.N.A. issue precipitated an emotional uproar all over India; it had profoundly affected senior and highly responsible officers of the Army itself. Opinion was deeply divided, both at this conference and afterwards, on the right course to take.

*General Scoones<sup>1</sup> to General Auchinleck*

*24 November 1945*

My dear General,

I am writing to you as a result of much thought into the early hours of this morning on the subject of the I.N.A. and future proposals which you put to us at your final conference. I am very conscious that there are large matters of policy involved and that

<sup>1</sup> General Scoones was at Central Command.

expediency also enters into the matter. I am also aware that my personal views are not based on the wide picture and, as such, they represent perhaps a particular viewpoint which might be termed the 'Army' one. I say Army advisedly since my information may be wrong, such as it is.

This brings up the first point. I have no information here which leads me to suspect that the I.N.A. issue is yet really serious in the Army. I have been into it today with my 'I' people and they say that the results of their efforts and their available information produces, so far, nothing tangible. This being so, and nothing having come from other sources (although the new organization may produce some), I can only regard it as an aspect to be watched continually and one which contains serious possibilities. Please do not think that I am trying to belittle the possibilities in any way. I am not. I do fully realize that the only thing which really matters in the present situation is the loyalty of the Army. The immediate object is to stop the flood of propaganda lest it should become effective in the Army.

As I see the position it is as follows:

- (a) About six categories of men were selected for trial.
- (b) These categories were chosen:
  - (i) Because the trial of all men was not practicable.
  - (ii) Because the dictates of justice demanded that the particular categories should be tried.
  - (iii) Because we owed it to loyal men in the Army who had suffered at the hands of the I.N.A.
  - (iv) Because it was vital to show loyal soldiers that allegiance to their oath was an obligation.

Since then the matter has become a political issue and the party taking it on realize that it is a poor one. To 'cover up' the true position they are flooding the country with propaganda. Their object is to cause us to drop the trials or, at any rate, to reduce the number being brought to trial. If they succeed in doing either, they will achieve a success. Success causes encouragement. It is logical, therefore, to assume that their propaganda will be intensified so as to gain fully their ends.

Turning to our side again. Any leniency in the form of reducing categories for trial must, if the above arguments are correct, take us further from our immediate object, as propaganda must increase.

As far as the Army is concerned the points I mentioned yesterday about taking counsel of our fears and moral courage may be held up against us and, if so, the Army may be confused as to loyalty and confidence.

I agree that it is highly desirable to stop propaganda as it is having an effect on many people, not only Indians. My point is that any leniency (call it what you will) will NOT attain our immediate object.

I apologize for bothering you with this. I appreciate fully what a difficult problem you have and if one line of this is of any help it will have achieved the purpose, which is to help. I write it because I feel it is my job to do so, realizing that it is from a limited angle.

Yours sincerely,

GEOFFREY SCOONES.

*General O'Connor<sup>1</sup> to General Auchinleck*

*24 November 1945*

Dear Claude,

It is impertinence for me to write about something on which you have so nearly made your mind up, but I feel I must in spite of having so little knowledge of the facts, and no responsibility!

You, I know, have in addition politics to consider, I have really only the Army to consider. And I just can't be influenced by logical arguments about de Gaulle and the Maquis! Everyone knew the I.N.A. were traitors; nobody ever considered them anything else, least of all the men themselves or their comrades who remained faithful. Their own initial defence was that they were led away into breaking their allegiance. Now they glory in it and say they were patriots.

If there is sympathy for them in the Army, which I still doubt, then it is because we have allowed these arguments to be used without any sort of reply. Our soldiers can only think that we believe them ourselves. How can we expect to keep loyalty if we don't condemn disloyalty? This is so easy to say, and I know you have considered that angle.

But to me the only thing that matters is keeping the Army, and I know you must feel the same. And if you really think that some further proof of your leniency is essential, tho' I myself in my ignorance can't agree, I feel that with your tremendous experience you must be right, and I will back you 100 per cent in anything you do.

Please forgive me for writing this after midnight!

DICK.

<sup>1</sup> General O'Connor (who was a British Service officer) was now at North-West Army.

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

26 November 1945

I have been told by Abell that your Excellency has agreed generally as to the line of action to be taken in regard to the trials of members of the Indian National Army as set out in my letter of November 24.<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for this decision but I feel that I must tell you that, since I wrote to you, I have had personal notes from Generals O'Connor and Scoones emphasizing the opinion they expressed while in Delhi last week, that further leniency was undesirable and dangerous to the continued reliability of the Indian Army. In my letter I told Your Excellency that the opinion of my advisers differed widely, and it was these two Army Commanders, who were supported by General Lockhart, G.O.C.-in-C. of the Southern Command and General Deedes, the Adjutant-General, who voiced these opinions.

These officers, I believe, largely base their advice on the conviction that there is no widespread sympathy today in the Indian Army for the 'I.N.A.' and that any further leniency is liable to confuse the minds of Indian officers and men as to where their loyalty lies in the future. Their opinions have considerable force and deserve the most serious consideration, which I have given to them. I believe them to be based largely on advice and information received from formation commanders and senior regimental officers of the Indian Army, mainly British. In fact I think the Army Commanders themselves would admit this.

I know from my long experience of Indian troops how hard it is even for the best and most sympathetic British officer to gauge the inner feelings of the Indian soldier, and history supports me in this view. I do not think any senior British officer today knows what is the real feeling among the Indian ranks regarding the 'I.N.A.' I myself feel, from my own instinct largely, but also from the information I have had from various sources, that there is a growing feeling of sympathy for the 'I.N.A.' and an increasing tendency to disregard the brutalities committed by some of its members as well as the forswearing by all of them of their original allegiance. It is impossible to apply our standards of ethics to this problem or to shape our policy as we would, had the 'I.N.A.' been men of our own race.

In spite of the advice of these Army Commanders and the Adjutant-General, three of whom are Indian Army officers of long standing and great experience of Indian troops, I am still

<sup>1</sup> There is no copy of this letter in the Auchinleck papers. Mr. (later Sir George) Abell had now succeeded Sir Evan Jenkins as Private Secretary to the Viceroy.

convinced that the course I have recommended to you is the safest and best—taking all the known and relevant factors into account. I propose therefore to proceed in accordance with your decision to give effect to my proposals.

I may add that I have set up a special organization in G.H.Q. with the sole object of trying to find out the real feelings of Indian ranks on this subject.

The trial of Shah Nawaz, Saghal and Dhillon was concluded on December 31. There were thirty witnesses for the prosecution and twelve for the defence. The published report ran to 387 closely printed pages. The Court having communicated its decisions to the Commander-in-Chief, he on January 1 formally set out his conclusions:

1. Two accused, Saghal and Dhillon, have been found not guilty on the charges of murder and abetment of murder, but have been found guilty of waging war against the King and sentenced to:

Transportation for life;

Cashiering;

Forfeiture of pay and allowances while with the Japanese.

The Court made no recommendation to mercy and the accused made no plea in mitigation.

Having found the accused guilty the Court was bound to sentence them to Death or Transportation for life—no lesser sentence is permissible. Although the Court could not take into account any mitigating circumstances in awarding sentence, it is necessary when considering confirmation of the findings and sentence to take account of the probable result on public opinion in India and on the Indian Army.

2. There is no doubt in my mind that the finding was correct and that it should stand in so far as the charge of waging war is concerned. As regards the charges of murder and abetment it is possible on the evidence that the Court might have convicted Saghal and Dhillon and that they were perhaps too lenient in this matter. I am sure, however, that it would not be right to order a revision of the sentence by the Court on this account and I consider that the finding of the Court on these counts should stand.

3. As regards confirmation of the sentence for 'waging war', I hold that it is our object to dispose of this most difficult problem of how to deal with the so-called 'I.N.A.' in such a way as to leave the least amount of bitterness and racial feeling in the minds of the

peoples of India and Britain, both being affected, and at the same time to establish in law that those who joined the 'I.N.A.' committed a crime against the State which it is not possible for the present or any future Government of India to ignore.

4. We must also, I feel, give the fullest possible consideration to the conditions in which Indian officers and men found themselves after the fall of Singapore, which were accentuated by the British defeats in Burma. It is of no use trying to judge these unfortunate people by the standards which we apply to British officers and men captured by the enemy. The conditions are entirely different, and misguided as these Indian officers and men may have been, it would be quite wrong to expect the same standard of loyalty to their allegiance as from British troops. At the same time we must remember, I think, that these same men, up to the time of the British surrender to the Japanese, had been fighting gallantly enough in most adverse circumstances, and would certainly have continued so to fight had they not been involved in disaster.

I am not in doubt myself that a great number of them, especially the leaders, believed that Subhas Chandra Bose was a genuine patriot and that they themselves were right to follow his lead. There is no doubt at all from the mass of evidence we have that Subhas Chandra Bose acquired a tremendous influence over them and that his personality must have been an exceedingly strong one.

5. If these ideas are correct and I think they are, then there is good reason for thinking that the accused might have acted in good faith, however wrong they may have been by our standards in forsaking their original allegiance. It is quite obvious that this is the general opinion held in India, not only by the public but, from the information at our disposal, by quite a considerable part of the Indian Army as well.

I believe that to confirm the sentence of transportation on these two officers would have the effect of making them into martyrs and of intensifying the political campaign of bitterness and racial antipathy now being waged by Congress in connexion with the 'I.N.A.' trials. I think too that to commute the sentence to a lesser term of imprisonment would have the same effect and that there is no compromise between confirmation of the full sentence and complete remission of it. I think we must also bear in mind the fact that if the sentences of imprisonment are confirmed they are almost certain to be remitted should an Indian National Government come into power. A reformed Executive Council even would, I think, be bound to press for a revision of sentence.

I consider, therefore, that the sentence on these two officers should be commuted to one of cashiering and forfeiture of pay and allowances.

Having taken the view that the offence of 'waging war' is what might also be called a 'technical' one in this case, it might be argued that a sentence of 'Dismissal' would be more suitable as being less likely to appear vindictive than cashiering. I think, however, we must stick to 'Cashiering' as the many thousands of 'I.N.A.' rank and file categorized as 'Black' are being dismissed without trial and it would seem logical and fitting that these officers should have a more severe sentence, even though the difference between the two sentences is perhaps, in the circumstances, more apparent than real.

6. The case of Shah Nawaz is more difficult. The Court found him guilty not only of 'waging war' but also of abetment of murder of Muhammed Hussain. The Court passed the same sentence as on Saghal and Dhillon and made no recommendation, neither did Shah Nawaz make any plea in mitigation.

If the Court wished to differentiate in its treatment of Shah Nawaz and the other two accused they could have recommended the first two to mercy or have sentenced Shah Nawaz to death. Their reasons for imposing the same sentence on all three are not, of course, known to me, but it may be that they felt that there was not much real difference between the cases, because Shah Nawaz's second crime flowed from his first, which was that he joined the 'I.N.A.'. That is to say, the forsaking by him of his allegiance, to wage war against the King, was the overriding offence and the other offences committed in the name of discipline, and assumedly under superior direction, were included in it; always provided that these acts were carried out more or less in accordance with civilized practice. There was no evidence of brutality or savagery in his case.

Whatever the Court may have thought, I have arrived at this conclusion myself and having full regard to the circumstance in which Shah Nawaz sentenced the man to death, I do not think that any differentiation can logically be made between him and the other two accused in the confirmation of the sentences.

I propose, therefore, in all three cases to confirm the finding of the Court and to remit the sentences of transportation for life while confirming the sentences of cashiering and forfeiture of pay and allowances.

\* \* \*



Opinions differed widely about the trial and its result. One biographer of Nehru held that 'the trial dealt a deadly blow to British prestige, canalizing the mass fervour into the fight for freedom', and said that Auchinleck's decision showed that 'New Delhi was on the retreat'.<sup>1</sup> Another wrote:

The I.N.A. officers were lionized throughout the country, to the horror of British (and some Indian) officers. History abounds with examples of the impact of the declining prestige of the armed forces on the stability of a régime. By conceding to the demand for leniency, the Government of India weakened the *élan* of the army.<sup>2</sup>

Nehru himself, in a foreword to the published proceedings of the court-martial, wrote:

Behind the law there was something deeper and more vital, something that stirred the subconscious depths of the Indian mind. Those three officers and the I.N.A. became symbols of India fighting for her independence. All minor issues faded away. . . . The trial dramatized . . . the old contest: England versus India. It became in reality not merely a question of law or of forensic eloquence . . . but rather a trial of strength between the will of the Indian people and the will of those who held power in India.

Other Indians, less politically sophisticated than Nehru, took a different view.

*Dr. M. C. Davar*<sup>3</sup> to General Auchinleck  
Kindest General,

3 January 1946

I on behalf of the whole humanity, on behalf of the people of India and on behalf of the members of my party and on behalf of my humble self most cordially thank you for your kindest act and for your most astounding courage and for your Christian spirit and for your noblest deed you have done to unite India and England in a bond of real friendship by accepting my request and by releasing the three Indian youths, i.e. Captain Shah Nawaz, Captain Saghal and Lieut. Dhillon. May this act be rewarded by

<sup>1</sup> *Jawaharlal Nehru* by Frank Moraes, p. 312.

<sup>2</sup> *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 307.

<sup>3</sup> Secretary-General of the United Party of India.

the Lord Himself and by our beloved Master Christ for your true Christian Karma (deed). May He be ever with you.

Yours in Faith,

M. C. DAVAR.

*Sir Shanti Swarupa Bhatnagar<sup>1</sup> to General Auchinleck 4 January 1946*  
My dear General,

I almost felt tempted to address you even in a more familiar way today! Your action with respect to the I.N.A. officers has proved that there are still some in this world who believe in the almost forgotten-in-practice saying 'to err is human and to forgive divine'. A fitting tribute will be the award of the Nobel Prize for Peace to you, for I sincerely feel that your action has contributed more to peace than any other single act in India during the last few years. My suggestion is no mere good wish, I have decided to work for it. I am asking Ridgway to send me a brief but complete record of your career and I am sending it to a large number of members of the Nobel Committee whom I count as my friends in U.K., U.S.A., Denmark and France. There could be no more fitting selection to this award than yourself, not only in my opinion but in the opinion of many others with whom I discussed this idea early this morning. . . .

In the midst of this turmoil of emotion, of misunderstanding, mixed motives, praise and blame, of Claude Auchinleck as of Stevenson's Lord Hermiston it could be written: 'On he went up the great, bare staircase of his duty, uncheered and undepressed.'

\* \* \*

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

*22 January 1946*

As you are aware the first 'I.N.A.' trial resulted in the conviction of the three accused on the charge of waging war against the King and this finding was duly confirmed, although the sentence was reduced from one of transportation for life to cashiering and forfeiture of pay and allowances.

There are three other 'I.N.A.' trials now in progress and the charges in these trials had been formulated and communicated to the accused before the promulgation of the finding and sentence and confirmation of the first trial. In consequence, in the trials

<sup>1</sup> The author of this letter was a Fellow of the Royal Society, the most distinguished scientist in India at that time and Director of Scientific and Industrial Research to the Government of India.

now in progress, the charge of waging war against the King is included in addition to the various charges of brutality and murder.

There is always a possibility in these trials that the charges of murder and brutality may not be proven, but there is a practical certainty that the charge of waging war against the King will be proven and, therefore, that sentence of death or transportation for life will be pronounced on the accused.

This will entail action by me as confirming officer to commute this sentence in conformity with the commutation of sentence carried out by me in respect of those convicted in the *first* trial.

By upholding the finding of waging war against the King in the first trial we have achieved our object, which was, as you will remember, to establish the fact that failure to his allegiance is a crime which cannot be condoned in a soldier, in any circumstances by any Government. Having once established this principle it is, in my opinion, undesirable that I should have to reiterate it by carrying out commutation of sentence awarded in connexion with this offence by future Courts-Martial.

As I have already said, the charge of waging war against the King has been included in the charges against the accused now under trial and cannot, I think, be withdrawn although if this could be done it would be a desirable course of action to take. However, I do not recommend Your Excellency that we should take this course of action.

In regard to future trials, however, and it is possible that there may be several more, I propose to drop the charge of waging war against the King and to include only charges of murder and brutality. If the accused are found guilty on these charges it will be clear beyond all doubt that any sentence awarded is in respect of these offences and not in any way connected with the charge of waging war against the King.

As Your Excellency is aware, sentences awarded by Courts-Martial, when the accused is found guilty of more than one charge, are awarded in respect of all such charges and cannot be divided or split up as can be done in the civil courts, so as to indicate that one part of the sentence is in respect of one charge and another part of the sentence in respect of another charge.

I feel that if the charge of waging war continues to be included in future trials, and sentences of death or transportation are awarded, the tendency will be for political leaders and the Press to stress the fact that the sentence is awarded in respect of the charge of waging war against the King and to try to conceal the

fact that the accused has been found guilty of brutality or murder.

I have taken this decision after most careful consideration and full consultation with Trivedi<sup>1</sup> and the Adjutant-General and other advisers. I trust, therefore, that Your Excellency will concur in it.

*Viceroy to General Auchinleck*

23 January 1946

Thank you for your personal and secret letter of January 22 about the I.N.A. trials. I agree that for the reasons stated by you the charge of waging war against the King should be dropped in future trials.

Auchinleck pondered the matter of the I.N.A. perhaps more seriously than any other issue in his life. None had ever been presented to him demanding such strength of character, independence of judgment, moral steadiness, intellectual clarity, statesmanship and humility. On his shoulders alone rested the burden of decision. He bore the consequences of the British triumph and the British failure in India through three centuries of endeavour, expansion, sovereignty and service.

He embodied the result of his meditations in a memorandum<sup>2</sup> which was circulated to all Army, area, divisional and district commanders in India and throughout South-East Asia. In it he bared his soul as no Commander-in-Chief in the history of the Raj had ever done or found it necessary to do. They had ruled in the noonday. His was the sunset hour of British responsibility and authority. In the fading light of an imperial system in retreat he had no lamp to guide either himself or the brave, bewildered and deeply saddened men, his friends and brother-officers, who looked to him for help—no lamp except his own steadfast courage, his forty-two years of experience, and his boundless love of the peoples, all the peoples, of India whom in those years he had striven to serve.

\* \* \*

There were several other courts-martial still to be held of officers and men alleged to be guilty of the murder of or gross brutality towards British, Indian or other Allied troops in Japanese hands. Captain Burhanuddin, of the 2nd Baluch Regiment, stood his trial on charges of waging war against the King-Emperor and of murder, or alternatively of culpable homicide amounting to murder.

<sup>1</sup> Sir Chandulal Madhavlal Trivedi, at that time Secretary of the War Department, and later Governor of Orissa, of East Punjab, of Andhra and of Andhra Pradesh.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix II, pp. 947-54.

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

*19 February 1946*

I have received the findings of the Court-Martial on Burhanuddin ('I.N.A.') and am considering the question of confirmation. I have thoroughly discussed the case with Deedes, Dundas, Mason, the D.P.R. and J.A.G.<sup>1</sup>

2. The Court found Burhanuddin guilty of the charge of waging war and were therefore obliged to sentence him to transportation for life. They did not find him guilty of murder but brought in a special finding of causing grievous hurt. They made a recommendation to mercy regarding the waging war charge, which is of course in accordance with our general policy; but also added a recommendation to mercy regarding the charge of causing grievous hurt because they considered that the accused was doing his duty 'according to his lights', as an 'I.N.A.' officer.

3. I first considered the case from a purely judicial aspect. It certainly seems to me, and all my advisers agreed on this point, that Burhanuddin exceeded anything which he could have thought was his duty and that the prosecution story about the beating was substantially correct and it was of an extremely brutal nature. In fact, it seems to me that it would have been in accordance with the evidence to find him guilty of culpable homicide not amounting to murder. The maximum punishment for causing grievous hurt is seven years' rigorous imprisonment by civil law and by military law it is fourteen years' rigorous imprisonment. I think it would appear vindictive to give a greater sentence than the civil maximum and I should personally on judicial grounds propose to commute the sentence of transportation for life to one of seven years' rigorous imprisonment, the same as that given to Abdur Rashid. This would mean disregarding the recommendation to mercy, though it is not quite clear whether it was the intention of the Court that there should be no sentence of imprisonment. But the matter is entirely in my discretion.

4. Of my advisers, the only one who feels any doubt on this is Dundas, who has the advantage of coming to the whole problem with a fresh mind, whereas the rest of us have had it continually before us, day in day out, for the last six months and more. He suggests that there is a distinction to be made between brutalities inflicted on those who had subjected themselves to the 'I.N.A.' code, and had therefore cut themselves off from the right to our

<sup>1</sup> General Deedes was the Adjutant-General; Mr. (later Sir Ambrose) Dundas was Secretary to the Defence Department; Mr. Philip Mason was Joint Secretary to the War Department.

protection, and brutalities inflicted on people who were not members of the 'I.N.A.'. I see the force of this, but I should be sorry to introduce another distinction which would be hard to explain to the public; and we did announce in the Press communiqué of November 30 that we would punish those guilty of brutality either against their fellow members of the 'I.N.A.' or against prisoners of war. Further, the argument that an 'I.N.A.' man is not entitled to our protection would depend on whether he joined voluntarily; and in many cases they joined under pressure. The circumstances in which Teja Singh (the man who died under the punishment inflicted by Burhanuddin) joined the 'I.N.A.' are not known. I would not therefore accept this distinction.

5. I feel, however, that before deciding the case on purely judicial grounds it is necessary to consider the effects which may follow. It appeared to us that we were on thoroughly sound grounds when we took the decision to punish for brutality, and we had really no doubt at the time that we should get the full support of the Indian public. Indeed the earlier utterances of counsel in the first 'I.N.A.' trial, and of certain political leaders also, were to this effect, and were quite specific. But we appear, in spite of every attempt we have made, to have failed to persuade any section of the Press, even the European, that the policy is sound. My advisers and I have talked with a number of Indians on the subject, and the line generally taken, even by the most reasonable and well-disposed Indians, is that by punishing these men (which they admit to be just) we gain nothing, while we do increase ill-will which may lead to further riots as happened in Calcutta. They suggest that while nothing that we do now will gain us positive goodwill, we can substantially reduce the present bitterness by calling off these trials and announcing a general amnesty.

6. I cannot myself recommend such a course. I feel that, as Commander-in-Chief, it is my duty to protect all members of the Indian Army, and it would not be consistent with that duty to condone acts of the nature committed by the present accused and other accused against members of the Indian Army. There is also little doubt in my mind that further leniency would have a bad effect on the morale of the British officers of the Indian Army on whom we might in the last resort have to depend. We have received a very full analysis of feeling in the Indian Army in general, and we have no indication that any section of the Indian Army wishes us to condone acts of brutality though we have considerable evidence of sympathy with the 'I.N.A.', particularly amongst the Indian commissioned officers. I am doubtful in fact

whether even the leaders of the Congress and Muslim League really regard our action as unjustified; but they find it at present a convenient stick with which to beat Government because of the emotions they have aroused in the country. In fact emotional and political feelings appear completely to have obscured their sense of moral values and no amount of argument will prevail to convince them that brutality and torture can not be justified on political grounds. I have put this very point to well-disposed and knowledgeable Indians of my acquaintance, and they admit it, though they do not seek to defend it. I am afraid that it is a fact.

7. I do not think it necessarily follows that the announcement of Burhanuddin's sentence would be immediately followed by further disturbances of the nature of those in Calcutta, though I think this is highly probable. The evidence indicates that these disturbances may have been caused by Communists who utilized the feeling of the Muslim League (who defended Rashid) for their own ends. On the other hand, there is authoritative opinion to the effect that the riots were not premeditated but followed naturally on the political agitation initiated by the students, the hooligan element being, as usual, only too ready to seize any chance to loot and destroy. This point of view is supported to some extent by letters now beginning to appear in the Press.

8. My own instinct would be to proceed on judicial lines with the policy which we have announced. This policy is consistent and logical for anyone who wishes to understand it, which is apparently the case with few. But in view of the emotions the matter has aroused, and is likely to continue to arouse, in the country, I feel that I must lay the considerations I have mentioned above before Your Excellency, and that you may wish to consult your Government. If it should be felt advisable in the light of the general political background to adopt the solution, which appears to be recommended practically unanimously by Indian opinion, of dropping the remaining trials, the only possible way to proceed would, in my opinion, be for His Majesty's Government, possibly in the name of the King himself, to state that while they think the line taken in India by the Government is both logical and in accordance with humanity, they feel that they must recognize the wave of sentiment on this subject which has swept over India, and in view of the coming political talks they have therefore decided on a general amnesty. I should be glad to discuss the matter with Your Excellency, as I feel that matters have reached the stage when a decision on future policy must be taken on the highest level.

*Viceroy to General Auchinleck*

20 February 1946

We discussed last night your letter of February 19 about Burhanuddin's case. I agree with you that a sentence of seven years' rigorous imprisonment is suitable and I suggest that when the announcement is made in the Press it should be accompanied by a few sentences stating exactly what Burhanuddin did: i.e. that Teja Singh was stood on a table, his wrists tied to a rope eight feet from the ground, the table removed, and Teja Singh beaten by 120 men in succession under Burhanuddin's orders until he lost consciousness, with the result that he subsequently died.

I should like to be informed when you propose to confirm.

Burhanuddin was duly sentenced to seven years' rigorous imprisonment. Fourteen other I.N.A. men—one officer, four V.C.O.s and nine other ranks—were also tried and sentenced before Auchinleck decided, at the end of April, to discontinue all further proceedings.

The last word on this miserable subject went to Nehru, who bore no small responsibility for the conversion of a matter of military discipline and morale into an explosive, potentially catastrophic, political issue. He had been granted some glimpse at least of the harm which had been done, which Auchinleck, at a cost in spiritual effort too great to be measured, had striven to mitigate.

*Simla,*

4 May 1946

Dear Sir Claude,

I want to thank you for your decision to withdraw all trials of I.N.A. personnel. I am sure this decision will be widely welcomed and will help in producing an atmosphere which we all desire.

It has been said sometimes that the regular Indian Army has been largely ignored while the members of the I.N.A. have been lionized. To some extent this may be true, but I do not think it is fundamentally true. All Indians are proud of the courage and capacity of the Indian Army. They are splendid material, but inevitably they have been looked upon in the past as agents of foreign authority and so long as political conditions in India do not change completely, this approach will remain. As a matter of fact various factors during the past few months have gone towards breaking down, or at any rate lessening, the barriers between the army and the civil population. This is all to the good. Nevertheless the final barrier will remain till the army can consider itself and is in fact a real national army. I hope the day is not distant



when this will happen. You must know that most of us have friends and relatives in the army, the navy and the air force and so apart from wider national considerations, even personal factors make us interested in the future of the defence services.

We know that large numbers of officers and men of the Indian Army, who were taken prisoners by the Japanese in Malaya, suffered terribly. Thousands did not survive this ordeal. Those who underwent this suffering certainly deserve our full sympathy. We know also that every person who joined the I.N.A. did not necessarily do so for patriotic motives, but, having personally come across a fairly large number of I.N.A. officers and men, I must say that I have been struck by the high calibre of many of them. I have no doubt that the basic motive for many of them was patriotic and the desire to help in achieving India's freedom.

It is sometimes said that we have exploited this I.N.A. situation for political purposes. Almost everything in India fits in somewhere into the political picture because the fact of India's subjection dominates life here. But I can say with some confidence that there was no desire or even thought of exploiting the I.N.A. issue for political purposes when this matter first came before the public. I believe I was the first person to mention it in public. The sole thought before me was that thousands of my countrymen, whom I believed to be patriotic, were in grave danger. I did not then know the full story of the I.N.A., but knowing my countrymen fairly well I could understand how they must have felt in a difficult situation. I realized also the repercussions on them of events in India. I had not appreciated the political and international approach of some of the leaders of the Indian independence movement in South-East Asia. I had differed from them in the past on international and national issues. Nevertheless I felt kinship and sympathy for these people and I knew well what the reaction of the public mind in India would be. The possibility that some swift action by courts-martial might be taken against large numbers of them filled me with apprehension not only because of the persons involved, but also because of the inevitable consequences in India. Sensing all this I made my first public reference to the I.N.A. and followed this up with subsequent references. It did not strike me at all at the time that political advantage could be taken of this affair. Then a strange and surprising thing happened, not strange in itself but very surprising because of its depth and extent. Though I had sensed the mood of the Indian people, I had not fully realized how far it went in this direction. Within a few weeks the story of the I.N.A. had per-

colated to the remotest villages in India and everywhere there was admiration for them and apprehension as to their possible fate. No political organization, however strong and efficient, could have produced this enormous reaction in India. It was one of those rare things which just fit into the mood of the people, reflect as it were, and provide an opportunity for the public to give expression to that mood. The reason for this was obvious. Individuals were not known nor were many facts known to the public. The story as it developed seemed to the people just another aspect of India's struggle for independence and the individuals concerned became symbols in the public mind. Whether one agrees with this or not, one should at least understand how things happen and what forces lie behind them. The widespread popular enthusiasm was surprising enough, but even more surprising was a similar reaction of a very large number of regular Indian Army officers and men. Something had touched them deeply. This kind of thing is not done and cannot be done by politicians or agitators or the like. It is this fundamental aspect of the I.N.A. question that has to be borne in mind. All other aspects, however important, are secondary.

I suppose everyone who has given thought to the matter realizes fully that it is a dangerous and risky business to break the discipline of an army. It would obviously be harmful to do any injury to a fine instrument like the Indian Army, and yet at every step, till major changes take place converting it into a real national army, we have to face the political issue which governs every aspect of Indian life today. Risks have to be taken sometimes, more especially when existing conditions are felt to be intolerable. You will forgive me for writing this rather long letter. It was my intention only to thank you; but then I felt that I should say something also on this subject, something that might give you a glimpse into my own mind.

Sincerely yours,

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU.

Who was the greater man, in statesmanship or moral integrity—the writer of this letter or its recipient?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### An Army in Transition

THE I.N.A. trials were the most dramatic and, at the time, the most fiercely controversial manifestation of the mood which was sweeping India. It is impossible to assess the difficulties and subtle complications of Auchinleck's work, or the solidity and magnitude of his achievement, if they are not seen against this background of political turmoil. Consciousness of it seeped into every aspect of his task.

The Labour Government in Britain had every intention of fulfilling its pledge, and no time was lost. Less than a month after the new Administration took office, the Viceroy was summoned to London for a fresh examination of the whole problem of India. It was also announced that general elections to the Central and Provincial legislatures, the first since 1937, would be held during the winter. In September Wavell was back in Delhi and made a new policy statement: provincial autonomy would be restored immediately after the elections; a constitution-making body would be established as soon as possible; and the Viceroy's Executive Council would be reconstituted in consultation with the principal Indian parties.

Congress fought the elections on a programme which was a mélange of promises to the voters; the Muslim League fought it on one simple issue—the threat of Hindu domination in a united India and the consequent need for a separate Muslim homeland, Pakistan. The poll was held in January 1946. The League won all thirty Muslim seats in the Central Assembly, with eighty-six per cent of the Muslim vote, and 427 of the 507 Muslim seats in the Provincial legislatures, with seventy-four per cent of the Muslim vote. Only in the North-West Frontier Province, where Dr. Khan Sahib's 'Red-shirt Movement', which was in alliance with Congress, won a clear majority, was there any check to the League's advance. Jinnah's biographer said: 'This was his glorious hour; his arduous political campaigns, his robust beliefs and claims, were at last justified.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Jinnah* by Hector Bolitho, p. 158.

Nehru's said: 'Congress had paid a high price for the August Revolt.'<sup>1</sup>

Even so, Congress formed Provincial ministries in eight out of eleven Provinces; the League formed ministries in Bengal and in Sind, and the Unionists, with Congress support, in the Punjab. The next phase in the Viceroy's and the British Government's programme was the reconstitution of the Viceroy's Executive Council and the convening of a Constituent Assembly. In January, an all-party Parliamentary delegation from the United Kingdom toured India, and became aware—some of its members with surprise—of the depth and extent of the country's desire to throw off British rule. On February 19 it was announced that the British Government had decided to send, as soon as possible, a Cabinet Mission to India to sustain and assist the Viceroy, and with him to discuss with the Indian leaders how political power could best be transferred to Indian hands.

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It was in this stormy setting that Auchinleck pursued, with undiminished courage, his tasks of keeping the Indian Army in being, of preparing it for the immense transitions in status, military technique and employment which he foresaw (a good deal earlier than some of those who were to raise a clamour subsequently), and of preventing it from being involved in situations which would threaten its efficiency, morale and unity. His letters now were not of battles, but of the turbulent aftermath of war and of the effects of political change. The future of the Gurkha units in the Indian Army, for example, which Auchinleck had begun to consider before the end of the war, was deeply entangled in the unsolved problems of an autonomous India. There was the extremely thorny issue of the Indian Army's relationship not so much with South-East Asia Command as with Allied Land Forces South-East Asia, which, after the end of the war in Europe, the War Office tended to regard, with sudden and tardy enthusiasm, as its own preserve. Since the majority of its forces under Alfsea's command were Indian, this was both unfair and imprudent. General Sir Oliver Leese, who had succeeded Giffard as Commander-in-Chief Alfsea, was a British Service officer; when he departed in July 1945 he was followed, it was true, by Slim, the architect of Fourteenth Army's magnificent victory, and an Indian Army officer. But when Twelfth Army was

<sup>1</sup> *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 304.

formed, to conduct what was expected to be a major operation in southern Burma, its command went to a British Service officer.<sup>1</sup>

In October 1945 it was decided to send Commonwealth forces to take part in the occupation of Japan. Although in fact the command of this contingent was destined for an Australian general, with an Australian staff, Mountbatten received the impression that it was to go to a S.E.A.C. officer. He accordingly asked Auchinleck's assistance in making a recommendation.

*General Auchinleck to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten*

14 October 1945

... I am entirely in favour of a S.E.A.C. commander. ... If you succeed in getting one appointed, I entirely agree with you that Messervy would be suitable in every way. ... I was going to write to you on this subject in any event because I feel that there is a case for the better representation of Indian Army officers in the higher commands of Alfsea. I realize, of course, that we have as C.-in-C. in Alfsea an Indian Army officer—Bill Slim—but all the same, in view of the very large proportion of Indian troops in Alfsea in comparison with British troops, I do think that we have a claim to be represented in at least one, if not two, of the army commands, such as Burma, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. At present you have Stopford, Dempsey and Christison<sup>2</sup> in command of what are almost entirely Indian forces. Would it be possible for you to replace at least one of them by Messervy and/or Tucker,<sup>3</sup> both of whom have outstanding records in this war and are eminently fit in my opinion to get the best out of Indian troops in the very difficult conditions in which many of these troops seem likely to find themselves? I know this is asking a difficult thing of you, but I understand that there are certain changes going on in the chain of command in England, and it would, I think, be equitable if one or two of them could be replaced by suitable Indian Army officers.

Four days later, in another letter to the Supreme Allied Commander concerned mainly with the problem of the use of Indian

<sup>1</sup> Gen. Sir Montagu Stopford.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. Sir Miles Dempsey had succeeded Gen. Christison in Fourteenth Army after the Japanese surrender, and Christison had taken over the forces due to go to the Dutch East Indies.

<sup>3</sup> Messervy, having commanded 4th Corps in the advance on Rangoon, was at this time G.O.C.-in-C. Malaya Command; Tucker had succeeded Messervy in 4th Corps.

troops to deal with possible civil disturbances in Burma, Auchinleck reverted to the same theme:

... I understand that there is on the staff of Twelfth Army only one Indian Army officer (D.A. and Q.M.G.) of or above the rank of brigadier. I hope that it may be possible in future to employ a proportion of the more senior Indian Army officers on the General Staff where their knowledge and experience of Indian troops may be helpful in the existing difficult circumstances.

In a very real sense Auchinleck constituted himself the vigilant guardian of the Indian Army's interests, and he was not afraid to tread on toes—some of them important toes—in his efforts. All over the vast area of South-East Asia the defeat of the Japanese produced, in country after country, a similar political repercussion, in which an upsurge of strongly nationalist sentiment was combined with a fierce rejection of returning (European) colonialist or imperialist domination. This was as true of Malaya and Burma as it was of French Indo-China and the Netherlands East Indies. Yet into all these territories Allied—mainly Indian and British—forces were pouring, in order to round up the remaining Japanese, rescue their own prisoners of war, and restore order and some sort of lawful administration in place of the chaos of the last phase of Japanese occupation.

Auchinleck was acutely alert to the dangers implicit in the employment of Indian troops on any duty which might be interpreted in India as the repression of a national independence movement in another Asiatic country, whether it was Burma, Java or Indo-China. As South-East Asia Command forces moved into the 'liberated' countries, Auchinleck thought it necessary to give a grave and timely warning.

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

*13 November 1945*

... It is my duty to tell you that I view with the utmost alarm this tendency on the part of H.M.G. in London, the commanders on the spot, the Chiefs of Staff and the authorities in Burma, both military and civil, to regard Indian troops as available for use in any circumstances whatever and for any purpose whatever without taking into consideration national feelings in this country. ...

The attitude of H.M.G. and indeed of all authorities, military and civil, outside India, seems to be that because H.M.G. is paying the Indian troops employed in these countries we can afford

to disregard political feeling in India. I am in no doubt whatever that this is a most dangerous line of thought.

In the past, extreme politicians in this country have always used as one of the planks of their platform the observation that the Indian Army was a mercenary army, maintained and paid to carry out the wishes and orders of H.M.G. in the United Kingdom. In the past there was quite good foundation for this accusation. During this last war we have been concerned to show by all means in our power that the Indian Army was fighting the battles of India and not only the battles of H.M.G., and in this way to cut the ground from under the feet of those who maintained that it was a purely mercenary army, kept up for British purposes. If we continue to use Indian troops in Java, as H.M.G. apparently propose to do, for the purpose of reinstating Dutch rule in the Netherlands East Indies, we can have no defence whatever against accusations that these troops are mercenary troops who are acting at the bidding of the British Government against the wishes of the Indian people. The same may also very well apply, in my opinion, if Indian troops are used in Burma to suppress a Burmese national independence movement. . . .

. . . There is a very grave risk of the Indian Army becoming disaffected to an extent which might lead to it, or at any rate certain units of it, refusing to do their duty. It is not necessary for me to point out to Your Excellency the serious results of such an eventuality and it is not one which I can contemplate without the gravest anxiety. . . .

I do not wish to appear unduly alarmist or pessimistic, but I must put before you my considered opinion that if H.M.G. persists in this present policy . . . in the Far East I have grave doubts as to my ability to continue to answer for the stability of the Indian Army.

The Government in the United Kingdom was by no means as clear-cut in its view as the Commander-in-Chief in India. A week later Auchinleck returned to the charge, this time solely on the use of Indian troops in Burma.

*General Auchinleck to Private Secretary to Viceroy 20 November 1945*

. . . It is clear that there is a real difference of opinion between us. We do really want to insist that the Government of India should be consulted and should have the right to veto. I think we should explain to the Secretary of State that we do not believe that Indian troops should be used for purposes of which Indian

public opinion and the Government of India would not approve. It would be unthinkable to use Dominion troops in such a way, and the point of view of every Indian must be that if we are sincere in our professions regarding India, we should now behave in a matter of this kind as though Dominion status had already been conferred.

Such were the Commander-in-Chief's opinions and actions at precisely the time when the Indian politicians were accusing him, in the matter of the I.N.A. trials, of 'an act of brutal oppression'.

\* \* \*

In the midst of these convulsions there were, occasionally, more agreeable matters to record. Co-operation with the Americans had not always been easy, but wherever Auchinleck had a hand, relationships were cordial and understanding. General Wheeler, formerly Principal Administrative Officer to the Supreme Allied Commander and in 1945 the Commanding General in what was now described as the India-Burma Theatre, had occasion to write to Auchinleck twice in a single week:

*19 September 1945*

For the past three years Indian Pioneer Companies have laboured side by side with American troops on the construction of the Stilwell Road under the direction of the Commanding General at Ledo. It is impossible to enumerate all their outstanding achievements. Without the help furnished by such organizations the road, numerous pipe-lines, signal communications, and accommodations could not have been completed on schedule and in fact many installations could not have been undertaken.

I should like to express my appreciation of the magnificent job performed by these Indian units and I hope each and every man may know that his work was sincerely valued by his American allies.

*25 September 1945*

I wish I could find words capable of expressing the deep pleasure I experienced last night when you entertained me so magnificently. The emblem of India Command in its engraved silver frame and your autographed picture are precious mementos which I shall always cherish. I shall never look at them without recalling four of the happiest years of my life.



## AUCHINLECK

It would be impossible for me to forget the occasion of our first meeting in Cairo in late 1941. You fulfilled all my specifications for a distinguished military leader, admired and respected by his officers and men. So it was with a feeling of real thanksgiving that I learned you had come to India to assume command there, for I knew your new assignment had a two-fold meaning for me. It would mean continuing a fine friendship, and it would also place responsibility of a difficult and important job in most capable hands.

Your magnificent record is a source of lasting pride, not only to your own countrymen, but to all of us Americans who have had the privilege and honour of knowing you.

I am grateful for the many kindnesses which you have shown me and it is my earnest hope that our trails will cross again some day. . . .

In November of that year the C.I.G.S. made the tour to India (and beyond) which he had first wanted to make more than three years earlier. The storms and stresses of the war, of victory and of its aftermath had beaten about Alanbrooke<sup>1</sup> as about Auchinleck. They differed deeply in temperament and outlook, but through all their vicissitudes they had preserved their respect and friendship for each other. Lord Alanbrooke stayed with Auchinleck in Delhi, and when he moved on he wrote him from Government House, Calcutta, this letter of thanks:

*10 November 1945*

My dear Auk,

I cannot leave India without sending you a line to thank you again for all the wonderful arrangements you made for my visit to Delhi and for all your hospitality.

I got the greatest value from the visit and was able to discuss all the points I wanted to clear up.

Very many thanks for all your help. I should like to take this opportunity to express my deepest admiration for the wonderful way you are doing your job under these difficult circumstances. Everywhere I heard praise of your wonderful work, and Dickie<sup>2</sup> was overflowing with gratitude for all your help and loyal co-operation.

Please thank your sister for all her great kindness and hospitality.

<sup>1</sup> Field-Marshal Brooke had been raised to the peerage with the title of Lord Alanbrooke.

<sup>2</sup> Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten.

## AN ARMY IN TRANSITION

With ever so many thanks and the best of luck,

Yours ever,

ALAN.

In its warmth and generosity Alanbrooke's letter conveyed his comprehension not only of all that Auchinleck had done and was still doing, but of the inner strain to which his friend had been subjected. His wife had left him, and he had instituted proceedings for divorce against her. His widowed sister, Mrs. Jackson, came to Delhi to act as his hostess.

\* \* \*

The political scene was dark and turbulent, and the Services provided an invaluable target for the politicians' more violent attacks. It was not a mere coincidence that, as the loudest of the clamour about the I.N.A. died away in the face of Auchinleck's wisdom, courage and magnanimity, new grievances and new causes of disturbance arose. 'Ironically enough', as Michael Brecher observed, the first new source of disaffection was not in one of the Indian Services at all, but in the Royal Air Force. In mid-January 1946 there were mutinies in the ground and maintenance units at Dum-Dum airport and at other R.A.F. stations in India and the Middle East. Genuine but petty grievances, jealousy and touchiness about repatriation and demobilization, the slackening of effort and purpose at the end of the war, and the curious and unjustified impression that, because there was a Labour Government in power, indiscipline might be condoned and mutiny no longer regarded as a serious offence, were among the factors which contributed to these outbreaks.

The great majority of the men were civilians in uniform; when they refused to obey orders they thought of themselves as strikers, not mutineers. They did not attempt violence, attack their officers or try to seize the armoury; but the distinction between a strike and a mutiny was not so easily apparent to their senior officers, who (in Calcutta) had troops standing by and also sought the aid of Major Woodrow Wyatt, a newly elected Labour M.P. who was a member of the Parliamentary delegation then touring India. Major Wyatt addressed the mutineers, and in due course they returned to work, but with their discipline impaired.

General Tucker, at this time G.O.C.-in-C. Eastern Command, with his Headquarters in Calcutta, wrote:

The R.A.F. disturbances had nothing but evil effects on others,

particularly on the R.I.A.F. who were to model themselves on their British colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

The tactics of the Royal Indian Air Force were indeed a close imitation of the R.A.F.'s, but they took the matter a stage further by declaring their sympathy with the I.N.A. Here again, however, indiscipline did not degenerate into violence; but in the Royal Indian Navy affairs took a much more serious turn.

The R.I.N., like the R.I.A.F., had acquitted itself well in the war; but both Services lacked the staunch, stable combination of tradition and comradeship in peace and in war which gave the Indian Army its strength. Neither Service had taken over the Army's invaluable institution of the V.C.O.; and in the R.I.N. a peculiarly tactless decision to give emergency commissions to a number of young South Africans had not helped to produce a relationship of understanding and sympathy between officers and men.

Bombay was the R.I.N.'s principal base, with big shore installations, barracks and some twenty ships in the harbour. On February 18 a number of ratings refused to eat their food or attend parade. On the following day—the very day on which in London it was announced that the Cabinet Mission was going to India—some three thousand Indian bluejackets began to riot on board their ships and on shore. Officers were hustled off ships; British soldiers were attacked in the streets; the mutineers seized naval lorries and roamed the city in them; Congress and Muslim League flags were hoisted.

The Army was appealed to for help. On February 20 General Sir Rob Lockhart, the G.O.C.-in-C. Southern Command, was put in charge of the whole operation of subduing the mutiny, with all the Services under him. The real danger was that the mutineers, having armed themselves, might begin fighting in the city of Bombay itself. Lockhart, using in the main Indian troops—a battalion of the Mahratta Regiment in mobile columns—had the trouble-makers herded back to their barracks. So patiently and with such restraint did the soldiers do their job that there was no fighting between the Services, and by nightfall the mutinous ratings were confined to their barracks.

On February 21 there *was* fighting. The mutineers, trying to break out, clashed with pickets posted outside the barracks and opened fire on them. The soldiers returned the fire vigorously and the mutineers then tried to climb out over the back wall of the barracks, but were spotted and driven back. In the city, some who

<sup>1</sup> *While Memory Serves*, p. 85.

had hidden overnight and procured themselves arms opened fire on the troops and threw hand grenades. But Lockhart had considerable forces at his disposal—including some R.A.F. Mosquitos which 'appeared over the town to lend more colour to an already warlike scene'.<sup>1</sup> The sniping died down in the afternoon. One of the principal Congress leaders, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who was in Bombay, issued an appeal for a peaceful settlement, and advised workers in the factories and students not to strike in sympathy. Privately, he counselled the mutineers to surrender unconditionally, and promised that Congress would do their best to prevent unduly severe punishment or victimization.

Throughout February 22 the mutineers, who were in charge of a majority of ships in the harbour, maintained their truculence and defiance, trained guns on the city, and rejected a broadcast demand by the Admiral that they should surrender.

But on February 23 Patel's persuasions, to which were added those of Nehru and Jinnah, had their effect, and the mutineers surrendered. There were minor simultaneous outbreaks in Calcutta and Madras, and on February 21-22 a more serious one in Karachi, which was summarily suppressed by the military commander on the spot, with considerable loss of life and casualties among the mutineers.

Once again the Congress politicians, as soon as the immediate crisis was past, could not resist the temptation of exploiting the mutiny for their own ends; once again a matter of Service discipline and morale was made the occasion of ferocious oratorical whacking of the ruthless, oppressive tyranny of India's foreign rulers. What the politicians could not get into their heads was that the alien oppressors were only too anxious to quit India as soon as possible, but not to leave chaos and misery behind.

However, when four days of civil riot and disorder followed the R.I.N. mutiny in Bombay, Nehru began to perceive where all this might lead.

What has happened [he said] . . . clearly demonstrates how anti-social elements in a vast city like Bombay exploit a situation. In every free country there is this problem, but in our country this is complicated by our fight for freedom. The time has come when we should direct our energies along the channel of constructive work. What happened in Bombay showed that the constructive tendency is lacking. . . . Our freedom is near at hand today. We

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

## AUCHINLECK

have all the virtues for winning our freedom, but I confess that we lack the discipline which is essential in a free country.

The truth of that observation was to be grimly demonstrated in the months to come. The mutineers were not brought to trial with any despatch or punished with any severity; as late as the following June Auchinleck was writing to the Private Secretary to the Viceroy:

Mutiny . . . is too serious an offence to be treated otherwise than with due severity. . . . I fully realize the great political difficulties of the present situation, but I believe that we should be doing India and the R.I.N., and also perhaps the I.A. and the R.I.A.F., a great disservice in the long run by not taking justifiable steps to punish these very serious offences against discipline.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile the Cabinet Mission was making—rightly enough—its preparations deliberately and carefully. Future British and Commonwealth defence strategy played a greater part in these preparations than either the Opposition at the time or historians subsequently were able to appreciate. The Labour Government, under Attlee's firm guidance, were a good deal less naively idealistic, or muddle-headed, about this great issue than was believed.

*General Auchinleck to Viceroy*

*9 March 1946*

I enclose an extract from a letter from Mayne<sup>1</sup> which arrived yesterday as I think you will be interested in it, though I realize you may already be aware of these proposals.

My own opinion is that this subject requires to be handled with the greatest possible care and tact, and I feel that it might well be very risky to make it in any way a 'condition' of agreement on the future constitutional set-up.

Indian opinion is undoubtedly extremely sensitive in these matters of defence.

*Enclosure*

At a meeting at Chequers last week-end of the new 'Big Three'—Pethick-Lawrence, Alexander and Cripps!—to discuss with the Prime Minister a mass of questions connected with the Ministerial Mission to India, it was decided that 'as a condition precedent to implementing a new constitution, satisfactory

<sup>1</sup> General Mayne was Military Secretary to the Secretary of State for India.

arrangements must be made for the defence of the "South-East Asia Area".<sup>1</sup> There was no soldier present at that meeting. The formula which I have quoted was based on the Cripps Offer of 1942 which laid down that H.M.G. undertook to implement the constitutional recommendations of the constitution-making body subject to the negotiation of a Treaty which would 'cover all necessary matters arising out of the complete transfer of responsibility from British to Indian hands'.

What it amounts to is that the Prime Minister has it in mind to make it a condition, precedent to the grant of Dominion status or independence to India, that India should undertake to provide defence forces sufficient for her own local defence and in addition assist, in Commonwealth or United Nations interests, in the defence of the 'South-East Asia Area'. (The 'South-East Asia Area' means nothing but can be taken to include Burma, Malaya and Aden.)

Can we expect Indian politicians at this stage to give such agreement? I think obviously not and I said so; but was told, nevertheless, to devil into the question. So I discussed things with Monteath<sup>1</sup> and 'Pug' Ismay and as a result of our talk we have asked the Chiefs of Staff the following questions which, as you see, deal both with the question of British forces loaned to the Government of India, and also with that of British strategic reserves located in India.

(i) What defence obligations should fall to India to discharge with her own resources as a consequence of the attainment of full self-government? (It would assist if these requirements could be given under their main heads in some detail for the purpose of exposition to Indian political leaders.)

(ii) If India is not yet fully able to meet with her own unaided resources the obligations in (i) for what restricted purposes only should H.M.G. be prepared to make British forces available?

(iii) What conditions should be stipulated by H.M.G. as to operational and administrative command and as to the authority competent to decide the propriety of the proposed employment of any British forces made available as under (ii)?

(iv) Apart from such forces as may be made available under (ii) and (iii) above to assist India in the discharge of her own essential minimum defence requirements, is it essential that H.M.G. should secure the agreement in principle of the new Indian Government:

<sup>1</sup> Sir David Monteath was Under-Secretary of State for India.

(a) to the location in India at the request of H.M.G. of other British forces for the performance of some wider common defence purpose, such as defence of the Indian Ocean area, or as a strategic reserve in that area, and

(b) to the provision of facilities of all kinds for the use of India as a base for such forces?

If so, what conditions should be stipulated as to the command of such forces and the authority competent to authorize their operational employment?

(v) Is it essential, or alternatively, would it be desirable that India should agree to furnish Indian forces for service outside India in British territory on conditions reciprocal to those in (iv)?

In a statement in the House of Commons six days after this letter was written, Attlee made no direct reference to the issue of defence but concentrated, with skill and his own brand of unemphasized eloquence, on the idea of Commonwealth membership. He said:

India herself must choose what will be her future Constitution; what will be her position in the world. I hope that the Indian people may elect to remain within the British Commonwealth. I am certain that they will find great advantages in doing so. In these days the demand for complete, isolated nationhood apart from the rest of the world, is really outdated. Unity may come through the United Nations, or through the Commonwealth, but no great nation can stand alone without sharing what is happening in the world. But if India does so elect, it must be by her own free will. The British Commonwealth and Empire is not bound together by chains of external compulsion. It is a free association of free peoples. If, on the other hand, she elects for independence, in our view she has a right to do so. It will be for us to help to make the transition as smooth and easy as possible.

The Commander-in-Chief in India regarded those last two sentences as mandatory, not only because they were uttered by the Prime Minister, but because they accorded with all his own beliefs and practice.

The Cabinet Mission, attended by a small staff, reached Delhi in a York aircraft of B.O.A.C. on March 24. The atmosphere was not propitious. Communal tension was rising; Jinnah, on a tour of the Punjab, had called upon Muslims to shed their blood for Pakistan; and his chief lieutenant, Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan,

at a 'Pakistan Day' rally in Delhi on March 23, had declared bluntly that Muslims were no longer talking in terms of a constitutional struggle.

Congress, on the other hand, took it for granted that there would be an interim Central Government of the main parties, with or without the Muslim League; and Vallabhbhai Patel had announced that, if the Muslims should then make violent trouble, Congress would be quite prepared and, with the Services under their control, quite competent to deal with them.

The Cabinet Mission therefore entered on their task with threats of sanguinary revolution hanging over their heads. *The Times* correspondent in Delhi permitted himself a sombre prophecy:

The leaders of both great communities in British India face the alternative of either agreeing between themselves and with the States on the structure of a completely free India or, probably, precipitating a state of revolutionary chaos in which they will pay the penalty of failure by being themselves swept away.<sup>1</sup>

The Mission spent more than a month in separate conversations with all the principal political leaders, in an endeavour to attain a practical and lasting measure of communal agreement. No tangible results emerged. The Mission then went off for a brief rest in Kashmir. When they came back Pethick-Lawrence, as the senior member, offered to the Presidents of Congress and the League the bases of a compromise settlement:

A Union Government dealing with . . . Foreign Affairs, Defence and Communications . . . [and] two groups of Provinces, the one of the predominantly Hindu Provinces and the other of the predominantly Muslim Provinces, dealing with all other subjects which the Provinces in the respective groups desire to be dealt with in common. The Provincial Governments will deal with all other subjects and will have the residuary sovereign rights. It is contemplated that the Indian States will take their appropriate place in this structure on terms to be negotiated with them.<sup>2</sup>

This three-tier proposal, devised by Cripps (who was clearly the dominant figure in the Mission), became the focus of a tense political struggle. Behind the arguments of the politicians lay the menace of civil war. There was a conference at Simla early in May which, in a

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 25 March 1946.

<sup>2</sup> White Paper, Cmd. 6829, 1946, p. 3.



week of fruitless negotiations, served only to emphasize the width of the breach between the two principal disputants. On May 16, therefore, the Cabinet Mission announced their own plan based on the three-tier scheme, which Pethick-Lawrence had propounded before the Simla Conference.

On the following day both Wavell and Auchinleck broadcast explanations of the plan, the Viceroy to the nation as a whole, the Commander-in-Chief to the armed forces. Auchinleck, speaking in Urdu, stressed the danger of strife and disorder. He went on:

You all know the good that comes from discipline and toleration. You have learned to live together, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian, in the service of your country without quarrelling and jealousy. . . . In this you have set an example to all India. I trust you, as I have always trusted you, to go on setting this example and to do your duty, as you have always done it in war and peace.

Both sides—Congress and the Muslim League—played for time. For those who continued to bear day-to-day responsibility in India, the very presence of the Cabinet Mission brought a respite from the worst of the burden, a certain sense also of moral relief:

We had a partner in all our trials. We were no longer alone. We felt, too, that since at long last we might become the instruments of a national British policy, then some in England who abused, scorned and patronized us might, because they would have to trust us for there was no one else to trust, at least desist from their old activities and at last come to see our point of view.<sup>1</sup>

On May 24 the Congress Working Committee told the Viceroy that its decision on the constitutional scheme would depend on the short-term plan for an Interim Government which was still under discussion. It also said that it interpreted the proposals as giving Provinces the power to decide to opt out of the groups from the very beginning. Wavell answered: 'This does not accord with the Mission's intentions.'

\* \* \*

*The London Gazette*, 31 May 1946

The King has been graciously pleased to approve the promo-

<sup>1</sup> *While Memory Serves* by Lieut.-Gen. Sir Francis Tuker, p. 117.

tion to the rank of field-marshal of General Sir Claude John Eyre Auchinleck, G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E., Indian Army, Colonel 4th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, Colonel 4th Bombay Grenadiers, Aide-de-Camp General to The King, with effect from June 1, 1946.

*The Times,*

1 June 1946

No appointment could have been more welcome or better merited than that of Sir Claude Auchinleck to the rank of field-marshal. He is acknowledged on all hands to have been one of the greatest Commanders-in-Chief in India in the history of that office. His period of command in the field was one in which the British forces were still inadequately equipped, but the forces under his command nevertheless managed to snatch victory at Sidi Rezegh, and, though defeated in the next campaign, succeeded in barring the road to Egypt against all expectation.

It is probable, however, that his greatest service in the course of the war was performed in India, where the whole responsibility for the administrative background to the campaign in Burma lay upon his shoulders. He won the confidence of the Indian Army, and his flair for the political work which came his way increasingly, as well as the respect in which his high character was held, made him equally successful in Council. . . . He is the fifth Ulsterman to be appointed field-marshal since the outbreak of the war.

*Sir Stafford Cripps to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*  
My dear Field-Marshal,

1 June 1946

No one could be more delighted at the great honour conferred upon you than

Yours very sincerely,

R. STAFFORD CRIPPS.

*The Rt. Hon. Leopold Amery to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

1 June 1946

Just a line of warmest congratulations on your Baton. No one has deserved it better, and if you have had your bitter disappointments in this war you have every right to think that, as things have turned out, you have possibly rendered even greater service to India and the Empire than you might have done if you had marched all the way from El Alamein to the Alps. Anyhow, you have the highest recognition that anyone can have and can feel that it is yours by right.

Lord Beaverbrook to Field-Marshal Auchinleck

4 June 1946

I hope you will allow me to send you my warmest congratulations on your promotion to the rank of Field-Marshal.

The news will gladden the hearts of the British public when there is little at which they can rejoice. And for my part I know well, from some personal experience when I was a member of the Government, that it is an honour which is certainly no more than your due.

Two newspaper tributes merit quotation. An Indian English-language paper, the *Daily Post*, said that Auchinleck had 'succeeded in winning the affections of an alien people in a manner given to few men to achieve'. And in the *Daily Mail*, Douglas Kay, who had served as a junior staff officer in G.H.Q. India said:

In India Sir Claude Auchinleck has a reputation as great as his immense responsibilities. Like that of Sir Henry Lawrence in the past, it rests upon the rock of character. If the transition period in India is peaceful it will be largely because Indians of every class and creed respect and trust 'the Auk'.

This prophecy was not to be fulfilled, but through no fault of Auchinleck's. For many months he exerted every nerve and every muscle to make it come true.

\* \* \*

On June 4 the Viceroy wrote a letter to Jinnah in which he said, 'We shall go ahead with the plan, so far as circumstances permit, if either party accepts.'<sup>1</sup>

On June 6 the Council of the Muslim League, meeting in Delhi, accepted the proposals 'inasmuch as the basis and foundation of Pakistan are inherent in the Mission's plan by virtue of compulsory grouping of the six Muslim Provinces'.<sup>2</sup> The Council went on to express the hope that the plan would ultimately result in the establishment of a complete and sovereign Pakistan. Jinnah, however, did not entirely agree with his colleagues; to him the plan was no more than a half-way house. He warned the British Government and he warned Congress that the quickest way to the independence of India was to agree to Pakistan forthwith.

<sup>1</sup> *The Birth of Pakistan* by Richard Symonds, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> In these six Muslim Provinces were included Bengal and the Punjab; at Partition, a year later, both were divided.

'Either you agree,' he said, 'or we shall have it in spite of you.'<sup>1</sup>

But the focus of the battle was, for the time being, the formation of an Interim Government. Nehru sought Wavell's assurance that in fact, if not in law, the Interim Government would function like a Dominion Government. Wavell replied that he could give no absolute guarantee, but that the Interim Government would be given the widest possible latitude. Jinnah argued that it would merely be a reconstituted Executive Council with advisory powers.

On June 16 Wavell, after a consultation with the Cabinet Mission, declared that he hoped that all parties, especially the two major parties, would co-operate in the successful carrying on of the Interim Government, which would be as representative as possible of those who had accepted the plan. The Interim Government, as proposed by the Cabinet Mission and the Viceroy, would consist of six Hindu members of Congress, one being an Untouchable, five Muslim members of the League, and three representatives of the minorities, one Sikh, one Christian, and one Parsee.

On June 18, according to one of Nehru's biographers,<sup>2</sup> Congress was on the verge of accepting the proposed Interim Government. Nehru himself, who had just been elected President of the Congress, then hurried off to Kashmir to assist in the defence of his protégé, Sheikh Abdullah, who was on trial for treason. In his absence the Working Committee was in almost continuous session, with Gandhi assisting in their consultations. He was in favour of rejecting both the long-term plan and the proposal for an Interim Government; his colleagues, however, were not completely persuaded. On June 24 they told the Viceroy that they were unable to join the Interim Government but would accept the long-term plan, with their own interpretation of the clauses under dispute.

On June 26 the Cabinet Mission adjourned further discussions about the Interim Government until the elections for the Constituent Assembly had taken place, and the Viceroy declared his intention of forming a 'Caretaker Government' of permanent officials—many of whom in fact were Indian.

Jinnah, who had expected that the Viceroy would go forward with the formation of the Interim Government without Congress, did not conceal his chagrin. 'You have chosen to go back on your pledged word,' he told Wavell.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of June the Cabinet Mission left for London. It had tried its best, but had accomplished virtually nothing. This is clear

<sup>1</sup> *Jinnah* by Hector Bolitho, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 312.

<sup>3</sup> *Jinnah* by Hector Bolitho, p. 162.

in the perspective of history, but it must be stressed that it was not the opinion of the members of the Mission themselves at the time. When both Houses of Parliament came to discuss the results of the Mission's work on July 18, Pethick-Lawrence in the Lords and Cripps and Alexander in the Commons all laid stress on the extent of their achievements, and all joined in praise—most certainly merited praise—of the 'amazing way in which the Viceroy carried the great load of these negotiations throughout all those months' (Cripps's words).

Cripps argued, as he had a right to argue at that moment, that they had succeeded in winning acceptance for their long-term plan. He said:

Unfortunately we did not succeed in setting up a representative Interim Government. We did not fail because of any difficulty between the Viceroy or the British Government and the Indians. We have failed because so far we have not been able to devise a composition of government acceptable to both parties. In the ultimate stages the issue came down to a very narrow one upon which neither party was prepared to give way, whether the Congress could nominate a Muslim as one of their representatives in the Interim Government.

As a consequence of this disagreement on this narrow issue, India was to be plunged into all the havoc and misery of communal strife on a scale not experienced since the establishment of the Raj, and thousands of innocent men, women and children were to be murdered in circumstances of frenzied brutality. And in this ruin the remaining British, military and civilian, strove to preserve the structure which they and their predecessors had laboured to build.

The Viceroy patiently tried to resume negotiations and to re-establish an atmosphere of trust. But the tempers and the appetites of the politicians were out of control; and they and their newspapers now unleashed those frantic passions and fierce lusts which, for years or for centuries at a time, are masked by the amiability, the gentleness and the tolerance which are deeply rooted characteristics of Indians as individuals and of the Indian way of life.

For six weeks more the politicians went on striking their postures. On July 10, in Bombay, Nehru, in the course of 'one of the most fiery and provocative'<sup>1</sup> speeches he ever made, said that the Cabinet Mission's scheme of groups of Provinces would never come to

<sup>1</sup> *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 316.

fruition. This 'brutally candid'<sup>1</sup> statement was added fuel for Jinnah's wrath and suspicion. Nehru also asserted that the Constituent Assembly would be a sovereign body, despite any policy statements that might be issued by the British Government:

As for a treaty with Britain, this will depend on the British attitude. If they try to delay the transfer of power, there will be a direct clash. If they treat Indians as equal there will be a treaty. Any attempt to impose it will be resisted.

The triangle now formed by the British Government and the two great political parties in India would have been absurd if it had not been hideous. The League defied Congress. The Congress leaders, believing they knew Jinnah better than he knew himself, were contemptuous of the League and refused to believe that the issue would be carried to extremes. Their attitude towards the British Government mingled mistrust and defiance in equal proportions. The British Government sincerely desired to hand over power as quickly, as completely, and in as seemly a fashion as they could. This was an aspiration fully shared by those who had to carry out the task—the Viceroy and his civilian officials, the Commander-in-Chief and his subordinate officers. They wanted to serve India as fully and as faithfully, in the end and at the hour of their going, as they and their forebears had served her in the plenitude of British power and authority. This simple, cleanly truth the Indian politicians could not bring themselves to believe. Gandhi had glimpses of it; Nehru had glimpses of it. But then the mist came over their vision; they clung to their ugly, demeaning illusions and lost sight of the truth.

It is pertinent to add that Auchinleck and the surviving cadre of British officers of the Indian Army wanted to preserve that Army, not as the instrument of some devious policy of British imperialism, not as a museum piece, not even as an end in itself, but to hand it on, strong and unimpaired, to their successors.

It was in this mood that Auchinleck in July—that month of deepening suspicion and sharpening hatred—prepared a commentary on certain proposals which, at his suggestion, his Army commanders and senior staff officers had advanced about the future of the Indian Armed Forces. This, probably the best and most thoughtful paper Auchinleck ever wrote, was compiled against a background of mounting communal animosity, of suspicion and acute personal and party rivalry, of cynical opportunism and political chicanery.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 316.

*C.-in-C. Policy Note Number 16<sup>1</sup>*

30 July 1946

1. I have read this paper and consider that within the limits of its scope it is sound. . . .

2. I am not, however, satisfied that our present conception of the future Army of India is sound or likely to be adequate to provide for the defence of India in five or ten years from now.

The future Indian Army that we have so far envisaged is an army of the last war, composed, organized and equipped to meet the conditions obtaining in the closing years of that war.

This is not to be wondered at as the conception originated while the war was still in progress, and before we had had time to collect our thoughts and think seriously about what the future might have in store.

3. We have now had more time to think and more material on which to base our thoughts. It is imperative that we should think, rapidly and intensively, so that we may not commit ourselves and our successors, to whom we owe the duty of planning progressively and with foresight, to plans which will be obsolete in a few years' time.

It cannot be too strongly stressed that the reorganization and re-equipment of an army, once launched, is very difficult to alter in scope or direction without causing great dislocation and much useless expenditure of money, time and labour.

For some months now I have been uneasy lest we were not looking far enough into the future in our planning for the future Army of India.

I am now quite sure that we are not. We must, therefore, review our plans in the light of coming developments, so far as these are now apparent to us.

4. Briefly, the developments which seem certain to affect the size, organization and maintenance of armies in the near future, possibly within the next five years, are:

- (i) Nuclear energy
- (ii) Bacteriological warfare
- (iii) Guided projectiles
- (iv) Increase in range, power and speed of aircraft.

The general effect of all these developments will certainly be to make the concentration in small and relatively confined areas of men, materials and transport, most difficult if not impossible

<sup>1</sup> The sheerly military, technical conclusions of this far-sighted document had so little effect on British thought, procedure and training that, ten years afterwards, the British side of the Suez operation in November 1956 was carried out as if it had never been written.

without facing the risk of losses which could not be borne.

I believe that the effect of these new developments on the machinery for the maintenance of armies will be particularly marked and drastic. I do not believe that it will be possible to operate large bases of supply concentrated round a port or rail-head, nor do I believe that continuous or concentrated traffic on single lines of communication such as trunk railways or roads or narrow shipping lanes will be practicable, except possibly for short and irregular periods.

I feel sure that armies will have to rely on many small and widely dispersed bases of supply for their maintenance. If this is so, then many lines of communication, that is roads, railways, waterways or ports will be needed, and it will be impossible to guarantee that these will exist in many potential theatres of war. In fact we know quite certainly that they will not exist.

Examples, if examples are needed, can be found in an advance that might have to be carried out on land against Kandahar, based on Quetta or against Baghdad, based on Basra. In these and many theatres the multiplication of bases and lines of communication is simply not possible at the outset of a war, because the necessary facilities do not exist.

It follows, therefore, that either land operations will become impossible or that land forces will have to be greatly reduced in size and complication so as to simplify their maintenance to the greatest possible extent.

If it is necessary to reduce the size of armies, then it becomes essential to increase their mobility and striking power, so as to compensate for this.

5. The fact that the maintenance of armies by land is going to become increasingly difficult and may become so difficult as to make it almost impracticable, points to the necessity for substituting supply by air for supply by land.

Supply by air can be carried out with relative ease from a number of small, widely dispersed bases, and aircraft are not confined to narrow lanes of movement to the same extent as land or water transport.

If air transport is likely increasingly to take the place of land or water transport for the maintenance of armies, we must consider seriously the system under which the air transport of an army is to be provided, controlled and maintained. It is obvious that, should air transport become a normal means of maintaining an army in the field, the Air Force may not be the most suitable agency to provide or control it.



The transport aircraft may well become just as much an army vehicle as the three-ton lorry or the jeep. This aspect of the problem demands urgent examination.

6. Bearing the facts set out in the preceding paragraphs in mind, I am driven to the conclusion that, before we proceed further with our plans for the Indian Army of the future, we must think again and think very hard in the light of probable future developments.

I wish, therefore, the possibility and consequences of reorganizing the Indian Army (excluding any possible British component) to be considered on these lines:

(a) *A number of 'divisions'*: These 'divisions', which should be of the same type and composition, would be used in conjunction with airborne forces as the offensive weapon of the Army. They should each contain a strong armoured element and a motorized infantry element to which should be added the essential minimum of artillery, engineers and administrative units. All combat troops in the 'divisions' should be as powerfully armed, as fully protected, and as mobile as it is possible to make them.

In suggesting a composition for these 'divisions', the aim should be to combine the minimum strength in men with the maximum hitting power, protection and mobility. It is essential also that they should be completely self-contained, and ready for immediate action when an emergency arises; this will demand a high degree of completeness and readiness in peace, and will be correspondingly expensive.

(b) *One airborne division*: This formation might keep the same basic organization as at present, modified as necessary to give the maximum of hitting power and mobility with the lowest possible man-power.

(c) *A number of self-contained 'Groups'*: These might be called 'Fortress Groups' or 'Defence Groups', whose task it would be to hold areas seized by the striking forces (the 'divisions'), to control occupied enemy territory, to protect our forward bases and lines of communication, airfields, etc., and in peace, to provide the necessary aid to the civil power when required.

These 'groups' should consist mainly of 'infantry', specially equipped, organized and trained for the tasks they will have to carry out. Their tasks being primarily defensive, the armament of the units comprising these 'groups' should be designed accordingly and their power of developing fire against both ground and air attack should be as great as possible. The old

idea that every infantry-man must be armed with a rifle and bayonet must be abandoned and full use made of modern small arms. At the same time, they must be self-contained and highly mobile, as not only will they have to move far and fast when they are called forward, but their defensive duties will demand the provision of highly mobile and powerful patrols to counter enemy reconnaissance activities and to give warning of impending attack. They will have to be provided with the best and most complete methods of warning against air attack and with the maximum of protection against bacteriological attack.

The need for the inclusion in these 'groups' of artillery, other than anti-tank, and anti-aircraft weapons and mortars is open to question and must be carefully considered. They must have readily available in their organization earth-shifting machines to enable them to fortify with the maximum speed and efficiency any locality they may have to defend. Whether this equipment should be provided on a 'group' or a 'force' basis is for examination.

Each 'group' must be self-contained and, so far as it is possible to achieve this, self-supporting.

(d) *'Frontier Groups'*: In India, for the time being at any rate, we shall need some more or less specially organized and equipped forces on the Western Frontier and, possibly, on the Eastern Frontier also, to deal with tribal unrest and meet the first shock of any landborne incursions from beyond the frontier.

The number of troops so employed must be kept to the essential minimum, as their duties and training are likely to militate against their being able to be ready at short notice to fight an enemy equipped on modern lines.

Their organization, armament, equipment and training should, therefore, be assimilated to the greatest extent possible with those of the 'Fortress Groups' discussed above.

Although it may be necessary to give these 'Frontier Groups' some animal transport and light artillery, they should be fully trained and equipped for mechanized warfare, so that they can take their place in a major war without the need for extensive re-training or re-equipping.

(e) *Internal Defence Troops*: In peace, duties in aid of the civil power should be a secondary responsibility of the 'Fortress Groups' and 'Frontier Groups'.

In war, these 'groups' should be replaced by militia units composed of the older classes of reservists, organized and trained for the purpose in peace.

7. If my suppositions regarding the nature and scope of future land operations are in any way correct, and I think they are, then it will be obvious that we shall have to revise our present lavish and over-luxurious ideas as to the needs of an army in the field.

These small, heavily armed and armoured, and highly mobile striking forces which I have tried to describe in this note will not be capable of sustained or continuous fighting.

They, whether airborne or landborne, will have to be held in leash until the chance arises to strike a decisive blow at some vital point in the enemy's defence.

When they are unleashed, their action must be swift, unchecked and final.

There can be no question of long preparation for assault, of daily preparatory bombardments by masses of land artillery, or of the building up of vast dumps of material and stores behind the front before an attack is launched. Indeed these methods of waging war will not be practicable, because of the impossibility of maintaining long lines of communication and great maintenance organizations in the face of the new weapons which are already in being.

Should an attack by these new model striking forces fail, there will be no question of sitting down and 'consolidating the ground gained'. The battle will have to be broken off and the attacking troops withdrawn out of contact, so that they can reform and be ready to try again.

When launched to the attack these forces must be self-contained and self-sufficient to the utmost extent in all their needs, food, ammunition, medical facilities, repair facilities, water (if the conditions demand it) and so on.

Their weapons must be so designed as to give the greatest effect possible with the minimum expenditure of ammunition, and this principle must also be applied to all their equipment.

While in action, they must live hard and strike hard—otherwise they will fail, and probably perish.

Should the attack succeed, it is reasonable to assume that the ground gained or the localities captured from the enemy will have the effect of forcing back his installations and bases, whence he has been using his aircraft and guided weapons against our areas of supply.

This should in itself ease our problems of maintenance and enable us to bring forward our 'Fortress Groups' to hold the ground gained and to cover the establishment of a new 'forward bombardment area' of our own.

It may also allow of the forward extension of our own lines of communication by land or water.

Until this happens, however, it is obvious that we shall have to depend very largely, if not entirely, on air transport for the maintenance of our striking force during its offensive and thereafter, until it is possible to develop land or water systems of maintenance to the forward areas.

This will entail a drastic revision of our present ideas of the use of air transport. We are now apt to think of it almost entirely in terms of an emergency and supplementary means of supply, only to be used on special occasions, or in particular areas, such as the jungles and mountains of Burma.

In future we must come to look on air transport as the normal method of supply of striking forces, certainly in the initial stages of a campaign and, probably, throughout it.

This being so, it is necessary seriously to consider whether the time has not come for the Army to take over the provision and control of its own air transport, instead of relying as at present on the Air Force for this purpose.

This is only a logical outcome of modern developments and will certainly come about before long. It is highly desirable, therefore, to examine the problem now as a matter of urgency before more time and money is spent on providing and developing forms of land transport which are likely to become obsolete, or, in any event, to be in much smaller demand than heretofore.

The primary business of the Air Force is to fight, either defensively with fighters or offensively with bombers. It is no part of its business to provide the normal day-to-day maintenance transport of the Army, nor is it really fitted to carry out this task, which is radically different from the task of fighting in the air.

8. (a) The General Staff should now consider and make recommendations for the reorganization of the Indian Army (exclusive of any British troops) to comprise:

(i) An airborne division (reorganized if necessary to meet modern requirements).

(ii) A number of armoured and motorized divisions organized, armed and equipped on the lines suggested in these notes.

(iii) A number of 'Fortress Groups' as described in these notes.

(iv) A number of 'Frontier Groups' as considered necessary to meet the special needs of Indian frontier defence.

(b) The General Staff will also consider in consultation with

P.A.O. and Air H.Q., the question of the Army becoming responsible in the future for the provision, training and control of the air transport required for the maintenance of the Indian Army in future wars, and the number of air transport units likely to be needed for this purpose.

\* \* \*

In the political field, the elections to the Constituent Assembly that summer produced, perversely enough, a result which gave both major parties cause to rejoice. The League captured seventy-four out of the seventy-nine Muslim seats; Congress with its supporters controlled 292 seats. The impasse was complete. Yet Wavell, whom his critics accused most unjustly of vacillation, continued to try to find the way out. He renewed his attempts to form an Interim Government by assuring both Nehru and Jinnah that it would be treated with the same consideration as a Dominion Cabinet. Nehru said that he must decline Wavell's invitation unless the status and powers of the Interim Government were stated in terms so clear and so unambiguous that there could be no subsequent arguments about their interpretation.

Jinnah took a different course. On July 27 the League withdrew its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission's long-term plan. On July 28-29 the Council of the League met in Bombay. At a Press conference on the eve of this meeting Jinnah said to the assembled journalists: 'Why do you expect me alone to sit with folded hands? I also am going to make trouble.'

On the first day of the meeting he said, after reviewing the arguments of the Cabinet Mission:

I feel we have exhausted all reason. It is no use looking to any other source for help or assistance. There is no tribunal to which we can go. The only tribunal is the Muslim nation.

On the second day he made a dramatic, irrevocable declaration of policy. Having recounted his efforts to reach a peaceful settlement, which he said had been treated 'with defiance and contempt', he asked:

Are we alone to be guided by reason, justice, honesty and fair play, when, on the other hand, there are perfidious dealings by Congress? . . . Today Muslim India is stirred as never before, and has never felt so bitterly. . . . Now there is no room left for

compromise. Let us march on. . . . Never have we in the whole history of the League done anything except by constitutional methods and by constitutionalism. But now we are forced into this position. This day we bid good-bye to constitutional methods.

At the end of his speech eminent Muslims, who had spent years of their lives in service to the Raj, climbed on to the platform, declaring that they would renounce all British titles and honours, and pledging their unanimous support of a resolution calling for Direct Action 'to achieve Pakistan . . . and to get rid of the present slavery under the British, and the contemplated future of Centre Hindu domination'.

Jinnah then announced that August 16 would be observed throughout India as 'Direct Action Day', on which the Muslim League would explain to the people exactly why its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission's long-term plan had been cancelled and its policy changed.

A conflict, and not one of words only, was now inevitable. On August 15, in a final effort to stem the rising tide of communal hatred and suspicion, Nehru and Jinnah met in the latter's house in Bombay, but there was no reconciliation. They parted, stony-eyed.

On August 16 the floods of violence broke loose in Calcutta. Of the holocaust of four days, August 16-20, General Tuker wrote:

It was unbridled savagery with homicidal maniacs let loose to kill and kill and maim and burn. The underworld of Calcutta was taking charge of the city. . . . I do not know—no one knows—what the casualties were. On one night alone some 450 corpses were cleared from the streets. . . . All one can say is that the toll of dead ran into thousands.<sup>1</sup>

The murders were the deeds of civilians. The Calcutta *Statesman* on August 20 said that the word to describe them was one found in medieval history, a fury. Yet the Calcutta killing was only the start. The fury spread like a fire all over India. There were weeks and months of sickening carnage. Over great areas the nerve and the morale of the police broke. Somehow the administration limped on; but the chief barrier in the way of utter ruin and chaos was the Army. No army was ever put to a graver test than the Indian Army in these terrible months; and for the last time in their long-shared history, the Indian Army and the British Army stood side by side, in circumstances of horror and misery that were none of their

<sup>1</sup> *While Memory Serves*, pp. 160 and 165. Gen. Tuker was the senior military commander in the area.

making, striving to restore order and sanity and decency. Rajputs, Gurkhas, Indian Pioneers, men of the Green Howards, of the York and Lancaster and the Worcestershire Regiments again and again were called in to clear up the mess.<sup>1</sup>

Thanks they neither asked nor got. The Indians held tenaciously to their loyalty to their officers and their regiment. And the British? The majority of them were young conscripts—National Servicemen—their sergeants were nineteen or twenty years old, their warrant officers were veterans of twenty-four or twenty-five. This gruesome civil war was for many of them not their baptism of fire but their initiation into another, in some ways even more testing, aspect of a soldier's life.

The historian of the British Army, Sir John Fortescue, wrote:

The builders of this Empire despised and derided the stone which became the headstone of the corner. They were not worthy of such an army. Two centuries of persecution could not wear out its patience; two centuries of thankless toil could not abate its ardour; two centuries of conquest could not awake it to insolence. Dutiful to its masters, merciful to its enemies, it clung steadfastly to its old simple ideals—obedience, service, sacrifice.

These words were never truer of the British Army than in these last dreadful months of its service in India. They were just as true of the Indian Army, bearing with fortitude an agony unique in its history. Their shared ordeal, however, was not of a glamorous or headline-sensational character. It was singularly unfortunate, though perhaps characteristic, that Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery, in the course of an extensive tour visiting British forces overseas, should arrive in India at this time and commit himself to—and allow himself to repeat in print many years afterwards—the view first, that 'the political leaders of both parties were equally desirous for the continued presence of British troops in India', and second, that 'Auchinleck was wrapped up entirely in the Indian Army and appeared to be paying little heed to the welfare of British troops in India'.<sup>2</sup> Both these observations were ignorant and inaccurate, and the second of them was grossly offensive.

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a loose colloquialism, but an exact description of their task. For an account by a British staff officer of the collection of corpses from the Calcutta streets on the night of August 19–20—Operation 'Grisly'—see pp. 601–5 of General Tucker's book.

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs* by Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery, p. 426.

On August 24 Congress withdrew its objections to entering the Interim Government. The Viceroy's Executive Council was reformed, and on September 2 was formally installed as a Government<sup>1</sup>; Nehru became Vice-President of the Executive Council (*de facto* Prime Minister) and Member for External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations. Auchinleck relinquished his seat on the Council as War Member, and was replaced by a Sikh, Baldev Singh. He retained his full authority as Commander-in-Chief.

Within ten days of taking office Nehru addressed to Auchinleck a memorandum on the problems of India's defence, 'more especially', as he put it in his accompanying letter, 'in relation to foreign policy'. The memorandum, most ably argued, revealed considerable ignorance of the real contemporary quality and purpose of the Indian Armed Forces, especially the Army, and a suspicion that the Army was not yet fully a 'national' army and 'in accord with public sentiment'. The new Minister was also anxious that Indian troops should be withdrawn from Indonesia and Iraq, and British troops from India.

Since Auchinleck had spent the past twelve months and more trying to forestall criticisms of this character and had anticipated, with a high degree of sympathetic intuition, most of the demands which Nehru and his colleagues would make when they were in power, it was not difficult for him to answer the memorandum satisfactorily as well as crisply. He had some experience nowadays of politicians' interest in matters of defence. In this initial stage, at any rate, he achieved a degree of shared understanding and identity of aims very different from his relationship with some politicians whom he had encountered. Like Nehru, he believed in a strong, free and independent India; and long before Nehru left prison, he had been doing his best to bring nearer the accomplishment of this purpose.

At the beginning of October the Viceroy, whose patience and courtesy lasted much, much longer than those of the political leaders whom he was trying to persuade to shoulder responsibility as well as power, had further talks with Jinnah, as a result of which Jinnah declared that he had received better satisfaction. On October 15 the Interim Government was reconstituted; five Muslim League nominees joined it, under the leadership of Liaquat Ali Khan. But co-operation between the two main wings was beyond achieving; the Council chamber became only another battleground in 'the War

<sup>1</sup> The Muslim League ordered every Muslim, from the Qaid-i-Azam (Jinnah) himself 'to the smallest and most frightened little man in his hut, to fly a black flag from his housetop in silent contempt for the Hindu Government. . . .' *Jinnah* by Hector Bolitho, p. 168.



of Succession' as Sir Evan Jenkins described it. Liaquat Ali Khan said, 'We have come into the Government with the intention of working in harmony with our other colleagues—but you cannot clap with one hand'.<sup>1</sup> And on the day he and his friends joined the Government, Nehru told the Viceroy that he deeply regretted the choice of candidates, which indicated a desire for conflict rather than co-operation.<sup>2</sup>

When Wavell urged that one of the three senior portfolios—External Affairs, Defence or Home Affairs—be transferred to one of the Muslim League members Nehru refused 'on the specious grounds that this would have an unsettling effect all over the country'.<sup>3</sup> When Wavell persisted, Nehru threatened to resign.

The opening of the new Constituent Assembly was arranged for December 9. On November 21 Jinnah forbade any member of the Muslim League to take his seat. 'It is quite obvious,' he said, 'that the Viceroy . . . is entirely playing into the hands of Congress, and is appeasing them in complete disregard of the Muslim League.'<sup>4</sup>

Nehru answered Jinnah on the same day. 'Our patience is fast reaching the limit,' he said. 'If these things continue a struggle on a large scale is inevitable. . . . There is a mental alliance between the League and senior British officials . . .'; and he went on to attack the Viceroy for having deviated from the spirit in which the Interim Government had been formed.

While this political *danse macabre* was being executed the massacres continued. In October, in the Noakhali district of eastern Bengal, Muslims attacked Hindus, killing, looting, converting Hindus by force, and destroying Hindu temples and property. The official estimate of casualties was 300, though thousands more had been made homeless; but the Congress newspapers spread wildly exaggerated reports of the killings. Revenge came in a terrible form in the neighbouring Province of Bihar, where between October 27 and November 6 some 7,000 Muslims, men, women and children, were slaughtered with merciless and obscene brutality. From November 6 to 15 there was a similar holocaust of Muslims in the United Provinces. Ministers of both parties hurried to the affected areas and upbraided the population; but it was the Army which had the thankless task of subduing these maniacal outbursts.

They were seldom called in until too late. A Provincial administration, if Hindu, sought to minimize the effect of a Hindu-led pogrom;

<sup>1</sup> Jinnah by Hector Bolitho, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Nehru, *A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jinnah by Hector Bolitho, pp. 168-9.

a Muslim administration did likewise when the offenders were Muslim. That the poison of communalism did not, at this time, infect the Indian Army, and that even if summoned belatedly to the scene of one of these mob frenzies—to see the broken bodies of children, the ripped bellies of pregnant women, and the vultures hovering in the bright autumnal sky—they still did their duty as soldiers and servants of their country, was due entirely to the selfless work of the officers who led them. In all this desolation this was a fact of which Auchinleck was acutely aware.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to all Army Commanders (by name)*

20 October 1946

At our recent conference I discussed with you the excellent work which has been and is being done by the British officers of the Indian Army, particularly the old regular officers and amongst them especially commanding officers of units.

I realize very well how very difficult their present task is and that it is not likely to get easier in the future.

I will be most grateful if you will take every opportunity of letting commanding officers know how much I appreciate the splendid way they are carrying on.

They are doing a great service to the Army and to their country.

The commanding officers of British units too are having not too easy a time, as I know from personal observation, though their difficulties are of a different kind. To them, too, I would like you to convey my warm appreciation of their unselfish and devoted efforts to make their units happy and efficient.

To Nehru, concentrated as his attention was on the political goal which now seemed so near, there came more than one moment of truth. On November 14 he said, in the course of a speech on the riots in the Central Assembly, 'There appears to be a competition in murder and brutality'.

But the forces of unreason were not to be quelled by a speech or two, however earnestly meant. The atmosphere towards the end of 1946 was increasingly sombre. Wavell, who never ceased to seek for a solution to the grimly insoluble, made one more attempt. He persuaded Attlee to invite two Congress leaders and two Muslim League leaders to go to London and endeavour to reach a common understanding; he proposed that he himself should accompany them. Nehru and Jinnah at first refused the invitation, then haggled and argued, and finally accepted. On December 3 Wavell, Nehru, Baldev Singh, Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan all arrived in London in the same

aircraft. They saw the Prime Minister and they saw the King, who had long been deeply worried about the course of events in India. The conference failed. By this time the leaders on both sides had committed themselves far too deeply and were far too intransigent.

Wavell, however, put forward to the British Government, before he returned to India, one more plan. It was an admission of the implacable facts, and entailed a phased withdrawal of British authority and British military forces from India, which would leave the Indians to decide their own future. The date he recommended for the final transfer of power was 31 March 1948. The withdrawal, as he envisaged it, would be a steady northward move up the peninsula of India through and out of the Congress-controlled areas, with a resulting concentration of British administrative and military forces in northern India during its final stages.

He told the Government that, during the autumn, he had put this proposal to a civil and military committee in India, who had been unable to recommend any better plan to him. He failed, after many hours of conference, to extract any definite policy from the Government. Their chief difficulty, and the cause of their non-committal attitude, was reluctance to face Parliament with any proposal which would make it clear that the British were going to quit India, and quit India quickly.<sup>1</sup> They were completely negative, however, in their response to the Viceroy's alternative suggestion that they should make up their minds to re-establish British power and prestige in India and to rule the country for a further period, which Wavell believed should be at least fifteen years if there was to be any effective support within India for this effort. This was the one point on which he got any definite decision.

King George recorded in his diary on December 17:

Attlee told me that Lord Wavell's plan for our leaving India savours too much of a military retreat and does not realize it is a political problem and not a military one. Wavell has done very good work up to now but Attlee doubts whether he has the finesse to negotiate the next step when we must keep the two Indian parties friendly to us all the time.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The facts about Wavell's final proposal to H.M.G., and their reception of it, were first revealed in a letter—the last Wavell ever wrote, as Viceroy, to King George VI—printed on pp. 708–9 of Sir John Wheeler-Bennett's biography of the King. The accuracy of Wavell's account of these transactions, as set out there, has never been questioned.

<sup>2</sup> *King George VI* by John W. Wheeler-Bennett, pp. 709–10.

This was the day on which—with Wavell still in London—Attlee suggested to the King that his cousin and, in Sir John Wheeler-Bennett's view, 'probably his closest personal friend', Viscount Mountbatten of Burma, should replace Wavell. The King approved the suggestion, but made one highly pertinent stipulation:

Lord Mountbatten must have concrete orders as to what he is to do. Is he to lead the retreat out of India or is he to work for the reconciliation of Hindus and Muslims ?<sup>1</sup>

All that Wavell had asked for was a concrete order, and the Government would not give it to him. He had put up a proposal for a long-term plan to try to reconcile Hindus and Muslims: he had put up a proposal for an ordered withdrawal to be completed in fifteen months. The Government rejected both alternatives and decided to relieve him of his office.

Lord Attlee's record of the decision in his autobiography was disarmingly candid:

I had come to the conclusion that it was useless to try to get agreement by discussion between the leaders of the rival communities. Unless these men were faced with the urgency of a time limit, there would always be procrastination. As long as Britain held power it was always possible to attribute failure to her. Indians must be faced with the fact that in a short space of time they would have responsibility thrust upon them.<sup>2</sup>

But how short a space of time ? Wavell, having reached the same conclusion and having advised the Government to take precisely the course which Attlee—without acknowledgement—was about to adopt, gave as the final date for the transfer of power 15 March 1948. The date the Government chose in the directive which Attlee issued to Mountbatten when he went to take up his post, and the date on which Mountbatten in fact transferred power, will be considered in due course.

Wavell went back to India for the last time—an India in the throes of an unadmitted civil war, with the leaders of the two rival factions sitting uneasily together in the Cabinet under his presidency.

\* \* \*

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. pp. 710-11.

<sup>2</sup> *As It Happened* by C. R. Attlee, p. 183.

Auchinleck, who was not directly involved in these sheerly political transactions, had his own problems in these months. They could be classified, from now until the final transfer of power, under the following heads: (1) the preparation of the armed forces for that transfer; (2) the maintenance of the morale, discipline and loyalty of the armed forces, especially the Army, through the period of transition; and (3) the preservation, so far as possible with the limited resources available and the breakdown of civil order, of internal security within the frontiers of the sub-continent. There was no order of priority in these tasks: they were inextricably inter-fused. The fulfilment of them was not made easier by the behaviour of politicians or the Press.

Some of those who sneered and snarled most loudly might have been a little discomfited had they read the following letter:

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to all Army Commanders 22 November 1946*

The policy regarding appointing Indian officers to high appointments in the Army was mentioned at the Army Commanders' Conference last month, and a draft letter on the subject was discussed. Please ensure that this policy is made known to all senior British officers in your command.

For easy reference, the relevant paragraphs of this letter are reproduced below:

It has been decided, and in my opinion inevitably decreed, that we—the British officers—are to go. Before we go, it is our bounden duty to do all we can to ensure the continued well-being and efficiency of our men and of the Army we have loved so well and served so long. We can do this only if we give freely and fully of our knowledge and experience to those who are to replace us in the higher commands and appointments. By virtue of our training and long service we have this knowledge and experience and we must pass it on unselfishly and willingly to our Indian comrades who, through no fault of their own, have not perhaps had our opportunities. But this is not enough. If our young Indian officers are to be properly equipped to replace us in high commands and appointments, and so be able to preserve the high standard of efficiency and man-management which we have always set ourselves, they must be given actual experience in the art of command leadership.

For this reason I have made up my mind that it is essential to provide the more senior of our Indian officers with the widest possible experience in the various duties which an officer may have to perform when he reaches the higher ranks of the Army.

It will happen, therefore, that Indian officers may be given posts which, in the normal course of events, might have been reserved for officers of greater seniority. This does not mean that Indian officers will be appointed indiscriminately just because they are Indians. Far from it. So long as I am here, I will appoint no officer, British or Indian, to any post unless I am sure in my own mind that he is properly fitted for it.

The politicians, however, concentrated their attention, a good deal less far-sightedly than the Commander-in-Chief, on other matters. Nehru became aware of an increasing agitation for the release of a number of former members of the I.N.A. who were serving prison sentences, having been found guilty of atrocious and cruel acts or of desertion and waging war against the King-Emperor. Of these there were fifteen in all: two, a former subedar and jemadar of the 5/14th Punjab Regiment, had been found guilty on three counts of murder, as well as on two of causing hurt; they were serving terms of fourteen years' rigorous imprisonment. The former Captain Burhanuddin, whose case has been referred to earlier, was serving a term of seven years, as was a Gurkha jemadar who had been convicted on six counts of attempted murder and one of cruelty. Six others, including one officer, all convicted on two or more counts of cruelty, were serving terms ranging from seven years' to six months' rigorous imprisonment. (In all charges of cruelty, the offences proved had been committed against their own Indian comrades-in-arms.) A havildar and four sepoys were all serving six years for waging war against the King-Emperor and for desertion. The sentences of all of them were due for review in January 1947.

*Pandit Nehru to Sardar Baldev Singh*

*25 December 1946*

... I am writing to you especially about the I.N.A. men still in prison. I know that the Commander-in-Chief feels rather strongly about this matter, but I should like you and him to consider the broader aspects of this question. Indeed, I should have liked to discuss this with him and, perhaps, we might be able to fix up a meeting some time later for this purpose.

Quite apart from the merits of each individual involved, and I understand there are only a very few persons in prison now, we have to consider the consequences of either keeping them in prison or of discharging them. You will remember that the matter came up by a resolution before the Central Legislative Assembly. Both the Congress members and the Muslim League members, as well as others, would, normally speaking, have unanimously

passed the resolution asking for their release. It was only because of the Commander-in-Chief's wishes in the matter that we got the resolution postponed. Naturally, in any such matter we have to give full weight to what the Commander-in-Chief feels and we do not want to go against any decision of his. He represents the Army and army discipline has to be maintained. On the other hand, it is exceedingly difficult for us to ignore a very widespread public sentiment. The result of ignoring it is bound to lead to public agitation and possibly some trouble.

The adjourned resolution will come up right at the beginning of the next Central Assembly session and our policy in regard to it should be clearly defined beforehand. You must have seen reports of a growing agitation in the Punjab among I.N.A. men demanding the release of the persons in jail. I have tried my utmost to prevent any such agitation developing, but I do not know if I shall succeed. Once any such thing happens, public attention will be drawn to it all over the country and it will be quite impossible for the Central Assembly to ignore this. The consequences will be bad both for the Army and the public.

I would earnestly request you, therefore, to place these considerations before the Commander-in-Chief. The I.N.A. people in prison have been there now for over a year and from any point of view there would be nothing abnormal about their discharge. I understand that some kind of review takes place of these cases periodically, and that January is the time fixed for such a review. If, as a result of this review, the Commander-in-Chief himself decides to release them, this would be in the fitness of things and would be greatly appreciated by all concerned. It is far better that the initiative for this came from the Commander-in-Chief and that we are not hustled by public agitation in the matter.

We have so many big problems to face that our natural desire is not to allow relatively minor matters to come in our way and produce new conflicts in the public mind. If we delay a decision in the early stages, the issue will force itself upon us somewhat later. We shall not be able to ignore it, or to postpone it then. Therefore, it is highly desirable that some clear decision should be arrived at in the course of the next two or, at most, three weeks.

As I have suggested above, I shall gladly meet the Commander-in-Chief to discuss this matter.

*Sardar Baldev Singh to Field-Marshal Auchinleck 30 December 1946*

You will remember we discussed the question of release of

I.N.A. prisoners a short while ago when a resolution on the subject came up for discussion in the Central Legislature. We were then able to have it postponed in deference to your wishes. But it is due to come up again in the ensuing session and in this connexion I enclose a letter from Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru which is important. I would like to discuss it with you in our next meeting.

Personally I agree with what Pandit Nehru says as no popular Government can for long withstand the pressure of public opinion. I have carefully considered the reactions of releases on the Armed Forces and my view is that it will not be adverse at this stage. The issue would of course be different if it was for the reinstatement of I.N.A. personnel in the Army. There is no such suggestion. The releases, if ordered as a result of the usual review, will not affect the Forces and [will] be appreciated throughout the country a very great deal.

After talking matters over with you, I will reply to Pandit Nehru.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to Sardar Baldev Singh* 6 January 1947

... I would like to make it clear that I am well aware of the difficult position in which the Interim Government may find itself in this connexion and of the pressure which a certain section of public opinion may exert in order to secure the release of these men. I have given these factors full weight in my consideration of the question.

In my opinion, the effect on the rank and file—the 'other ranks'—of the Army of the premature release of these men might not in itself be very great though this would depend to a considerable extent on the publicity given to this condonation and to the extent to which it was used to make political capital against the late Government. In this connexion, it must be realized that it is not only the men of the Army who may be affected, but also those of the Royal Indian Navy and the Royal Indian Air Force, neither of which forces are, for reasons which I need not go into, as stable or reliable as the Army.

The effect of this proposed condonation of crimes of brutality and violence on the officers of the Army, and also on those of the other two Services, might, in my considered opinion, be serious. The Indian officers of the Army, already uneasy and apprehensive lest the officers of the 'I.N.A.' should be reinstated, would, I fear, regard this action as the thin end of the wedge and would become increasingly nervous of their future prospects. The senior British officers of the Army, on whom, to a very large extent, the



continuance of the present excellent demeanour of the Army depends, would, I feel, regard this action as a betrayal of the principles to which they have throughout their service been taught to adhere and would, in consequence, be likely to lose faith in me as Commander-in-Chief. They would then be likely to ask themselves whether it was worth their while to continue to devote themselves whole-heartedly and selflessly, as they are now doing, to keeping the Army reliable and efficient, so that it may remain an instrument on which the Cabinet may rely to carry out its instructions in the event of serious internal trouble. These British officers have helped to a very great extent to make the Indian Army what it is today and I can not view with any equanimity any action which might seriously impair their morale in the troublous months which appear to lie ahead of us. . . .

I regret that in no circumstances can I agree to use my authority as Commander-in-Chief to remit the sentences on those two men found guilty of murder of their own countrymen and former comrades-in-arms.

As regards the remainder, there would, in the ordinary course of events, be no question of their sentences being remitted or reduced as a result of a statutory review hardly one year after their conviction. In any other criminal case such clemency would never be considered unless some fresh mitigating circumstances had come to light meanwhile, and I could not, without doing violence to my principles and my conscience, consider taking any such executive action in the cases under consideration. . . .

The final decision in this matter rests of course with the Governor-General in Council, but I would urge with all the earnestness at my command a firm stand against any agitation for the release of these convicts. It is my honest opinion that surrender to such pressure, which is, I believe, largely uninformed and emotional, is likely to make my task and the task of my subordinates in maintaining the discipline and reliability of the Armed Forces extremely difficult, if not impossible, and, moreover, to put Government itself in a position in which it will be unable to resist demands for the condonation of any crime, however obvious and non-political, which may have been committed before it took office. Such a situation so far as the Armed Forces are concerned can not be contemplated by me or by my advisers without the greatest anxiety.

The Defence Member dealt with this letter by circulating a copy of it, with his own comments and conclusions attached, to the

members of the Interim Government. By the time he did so the agitation had widened to include an urgent plea that all former members of the I.N.A. should receive the balance of their pay and allowances which they had forfeited. Baldev Singh's memorandum ended:

I feel that the time has definitely come for the Government of India to decide in favour of the release of I.N.A. prisoners and the payment of the forfeited balance of pay to the I.N.A. personnel. If Cabinet agrees to this course a recommendation to this effect might be sent to the Commander-in-Chief.

*Viceroy to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

9 January 1947

Baldev Singh came to see me this morning about the matter of the I.N.A. He said that a resolution is likely to be moved in the Assembly early in February about the release of the I.N.A. men still under sentence, and that it will have the support of both the Congress and the Muslim League. He said that further demands were likely to be made for the restoration of payment to the I.N.A. men, and also for their reinstatement in the Army. A meeting in Calcutta . . . will be held on January 23, at which the I.N.A. will put forward their demands.

Baldev Singh seemed to be inclined to give way over the release of prisoners and of the payment of arrears, not because he really thought they were justified himself, but to relieve political pressure. He agreed that reinstatement would be a serious matter, but said that it might be pressed.

I warned him most forcibly indeed that any concession to the I.N.A., even to the release of these prisoners, would be fatal for the Indian Army; that it would almost certainly make it impossible for the Commander-in-Chief, or any senior officer of the British Army, to remain responsible for the Indian Army, and I should find it impossible to accept responsibility for the security of India if the confidence of the Army was to be shaken in this way. I said that it seemed to me to be sheer madness to treat the I.N.A. as heroes, when most of them were the weakest element of the Army, men who had joined our enemies for the most part from fear of hardship and danger rather than from patriotism; if those who had stood firm to their oath, who were the greater part of the men captured, were to see the I.N.A. treated like this, the effect would be fatal to the Indian Army.

Baldev said he would represent what I had said to the political leaders, but he held out no great hope of being able to convince them. I am sure however that if we stand firm on this, we shall

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gain our point. I trust therefore that you intend to maintain absolutely that you cannot consent in any circumstances to any further concessions of any kind to the I.N.A. I am sure that all the senior officers of the Army will support you on this matter, and I shall of course do so.

It will perhaps be advisable that we should have a talk again, if so the sooner the better.

Auchinleck at once gave Wavell a verbal assurance that he would in no circumstances consent to further concessions to the I.N.A., and annotated the Viceroy's letter to that effect.

*Viceroy to Secretary of State for India*

21 January 1947

Defence Member has put forward for discussion in Cabinet a paper recommending that I.N.A. men serving sentences should be released and that all I.N.A. men should be paid forfeited amounts of pay and allowances, i.e. that they should be paid for the period during which they served our enemies. . . .

5. The Commander-in-Chief is very strongly opposed indeed to these recommendations. He considers acceptance would be fatal to the morale of the Indian Army and would make his own position impossible.

6. I entirely agree with the Commander-in-Chief and shall support him fully. I have refused to refer the case to the Cabinet without further consideration, have stated my own objections, and have made it clear that even if the proposal, to which I believe the Muslim League is committed by previous statements, is acceptable to my colleagues I shall refer the matter to H.M.G. I have suggested a discussion, in the first place, between Baldev Singh, Nehru, Liaquat, the Commander-in-Chief and myself, but I doubt whether we shall reach agreement.

7. I trust I shall have the full support of H.M.G. in resisting these demands, the acceptance of which would I am sure result in beginning the disintegration of the Indian Army, which it is essential to avoid. I do not believe that the Cabinet would in the end resign if overruled on this issue. . . .

*Secretary of State for India to Viceroy*

22 January 1947

I have discussed your telegram of January 21 about the I.N.A. men with my colleagues and we approve your action in suggesting as a first measure a discussion outside the Cabinet as in your paragraph 6. We hope that you will be able to convince Baldev Singh, Nehru and Liaquat of very serious and possibly irreparable

damage to Indian Army that might result from pursuit of proposal put up to you by Defence Member.

If despite such preliminary consideration you cannot resist reference to the case to Cabinet we agree that you should in last resort overrule your colleagues as you have the right to do when in your judgment the interests of British India are essentially affected. You may of course if you think fit indicate at this point that you have authority of H.M.G. behind you in the use of this overruling power. . . .

For the time being Wavell and Auchinleck made their point; but again and again, before and after the end of the Raj, the politicians were to return to this nauseous business, like bluebottles to putrefying meat. But even graver matters and much more radical decisions were portending.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### Transfer of Power

ON 20 February 1947 the Prime Minister announced in the House of Commons the British Government's 'definite intention to take the necessary steps to effect the transfer of power into responsible Indian hands by a date not later than June 1948'. However, if a constitution could not be drafted by a 'fully representative Constituent Assembly before that time', Attlee continued:

His Majesty's Government will have to consider to whom the powers of the Central Government of British India should be handed over, on the due date, whether as a whole to some form of Central Government for British India, or in some areas to the existing Provincial Governments, or in such other way as may seem most reasonable and in the best interests of the Indian people.

In his dry, toneless voice Attlee told the House that Lord Wavell's 'war-time appointment' would be terminated, and that Admiral Viscount Mountbatten of Burma would succeed him in order to effect the transfer of power.

*Gandhi to Nehru*

21 February 1947

This may lead to Pakistan for those Provinces or portions which may want it. No one will be forced one way or the other.

*Nehru to Gandhi*

24 February 1947

Mr. Attlee's statement contains much that is indefinite and likely to give trouble. But I am convinced that it is in the final analysis a brave and definite statement. It meets our oft-repeated demand for quitting India.<sup>1</sup>

On this same day Wavell wrote to King George VI his last letter as Viceroy, referred to above (page 852, footnote 1), and concluded with the words:

<sup>1</sup> Both letters are quoted in *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 335.

My efforts since I returned from England have been directed to the following objects, so far as internal security is concerned:

(a) That we should have as good and detailed a plan as possible for the protection and withdrawal of our nationals in an emergency;

(b) that we should try to prevent British troops being used for the suppression of one party in the interests of another, and that we should not become involved in communal or labour disturbances if we can avoid it; and

(c) that we should for as long as possible maintain the stability and integrity of the Indian Army, which is at the present time perhaps the brightest part of the Indian outlook.<sup>1</sup>

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to Lieutenant-General Scoones<sup>2</sup> 2 March 1947*

... The recent announcement by H.M.G. has, as you will have realized, come as a considerable shock to very many people in this country who had thought, if they thought at all, that the process would be much more gradual. In fact, I think it would be true to say that a great number thought that it would never happen, or if it did, that it would come about so gradually as to be almost imperceptible.

This announcement has brought a sharp realization of the very short time left for preparation and of the extreme urgency of the whole problem. It is too early yet to assess the effect on the country generally, but I do not see how it can fail to have an unsettling effect on the Indian officers and men of the Armed Forces and I am feeling considerable anxiety about this. The lack of definition in the announcement concerning the party or parties to whom responsibility is to be handed over is causing the greatest uneasiness in practically everyone's mind and this is readily understandable.

There is a general feeling that the Viceroy has been rather shabbily treated and a strong feeling of regret in many quarters that he should be going. There is little comment, other than scurrilous, so far about his successor, who, in spite of his great record, is not really known to India or the Indians, which may seem strange but is, I think, true. . . .

In the preliminary discussions before Lord Mountbatten left for

<sup>1</sup> *King George VI* by John W. Wheeler-Bennett, p. 709.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. Scoones had just assumed the post of Secretary of the Military Department in the India Office.

India he insisted—just as firmly as the King had insisted when he first heard of the proposal—that he be given a completely clear directive by the Prime Minister. That which Wavell had asked for in December and had been refused, was conceded to Mountbatten in March.

*Prime Minister to Admiral Mountbatten*

*March 1947*

The statement which was issued at the time of the announcement of your appointment sets out the policy of the Government and the principles in accordance with which the transfer of power to Indian hands should be effected.

My colleagues of the Cabinet Mission and I have discussed with you the general lines of your approach to the problems which will confront you in India. It will, I think, be useful to you to have on record the salient points which you should have in mind in dealing with the situation. I have, therefore, set them down here.

It is the definite objective of His Majesty's Government to obtain a unitary Government for British India and the Indian States, if possible within the British Commonwealth, through the medium of a Constituent Assembly, set up and run in accordance with the Cabinet Mission's plan, and you should do the utmost in your power to persuade all Parties to work together to this end, and advise His Majesty's Government, in the light of developments, as to the steps that will have to be taken.

Since, however, this plan can only become operative in respect of British India by agreement between the major Parties, there can be no question of compelling either major Party to accept it.

If by October 1 you consider that there is no prospect of reaching a settlement on the basis of a unitary government for British India, either with or without the co-operation of the Indian States, you should report to His Majesty's Government on the steps which you consider should be taken for the handing over of power on the due date.

It is, of course, important that the Indian States should adjust their relations with the authorities to whom it is intended to hand over power in British India; but as was explicitly stated by the Cabinet Mission, His Majesty's Government do not intend to hand over their powers and obligations under paramountcy to any successor Government. It is not intended to bring paramountcy as a system to a conclusion earlier than the date of the final transfer of power, but you are authorized, at such time as you

think appropriate, to enter into negotiations with individual States for adjusting their relations with the Crown.

You will do your best to persuade the rulers of any Indian States in which political progress has been slow to progress rapidly towards some form of more democratic government in their States. You will also aid and assist the States in coming to fair and just arrangements with the leaders of British India as to their future relationships.

The date fixed for the transfer of power is a flexible one to within one month; but you should aim at 1 June 1948 as the effective date for the transfer of power.

In your relations with the Interim Government you will be guided by the general terms of the Viceroy's letter of 30 May 1946 to the President of the Congress Party, and of the statement made by the Secretary of State for India in the House of Lords on 13 March 1947. These statements made it clear that, while the Interim Government would not have the same powers as a Dominion Government, His Majesty's Government would treat the Interim Government with the same consultation and consideration as a Dominion Government, and give it the greatest possible freedom in the day-to-day exercise of the administration of the country.

It is essential that there should be the fullest co-operation with the Indian leaders in all steps that are taken as to the withdrawal of British power so that the process may go forward as smoothly as possible.

The keynote of your administration should therefore be the closest co-operation with the Indians and you should make it clear to the whole of the Secretary of State's Services that this is so, and that it is their duty to their countries to work to this end.

You should take every opportunity of stressing the importance of ensuring that the transfer of power is effected with full regard to the defence requirements of India. In the first place you will impress upon the Indian leaders the great importance of avoiding any breach in the continuity of the Indian Army and of maintaining the organization of defence on an all Indian basis. Secondly you will point out the need for continued collaboration in the security of the Indian Ocean area for which provision might be made in an agreement between the two countries. At a suitable date His Majesty's Government would be ready to send military and other experts to India to assist in discussing the terms of such an agreement.

You will no doubt inform Provincial Governors of the substance of this letter.



This document Lord Mountbatten took with him to India and he sent a copy of it to Auchinleck about a month after his arrival. Meanwhile, there was a stormy debate about India in the House of Commons on March 5-6, and energetic preparations went on for Mountbatten's departure.<sup>1</sup>

*Lord Mountbatten to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

14 March 1947

My dear Claude,

God knows I did everything in my power to be allowed to go back to sea. Since however the King overruled me and I am to come to India I would like you to know that the feeling that I have such a true and wise friend in you makes all the difference to me.

I hope we shall see lots of each other.

Looking forward to seeing you,

DICKIE.

In India the fires of communal warfare flared up again, this time in the Punjab. Muslims, Sikhs and orthodox Hindus had, for months past, been forming—and arming—private armies. The Governor of the Punjab, Sir Evan Jenkins, formerly Private Secretary to the Viceroy, urged the Unionist Prime Minister, Khizr Hayat Khan, to suppress them, but Khizr put off action until January 24, by which time it was too late. Then the Muslim League, which had no representatives in Khizr's Cabinet and bitterly resented this fact, launched a mass civil disobedience campaign against the belated ban on private armies. They maintained this form of political pressure for more than a month. Khizr gave way, removed a ban on public meetings, and released Muslim League political prisoners on condition that there was an end to civil disobedience. Congress supporters and Sikhs were as relentless in their opposition to the idea of Pakistan, and its inevitable effect on the prosperous, fertile province of the Punjab, as Muslim Leaguers were determined to bring it about. On the quite justifiable grounds that Attlee's statement on February 20 had altered the political situation, Khizr resigned on March 2. On the following day the Governor called on the Khan of Mamdot, the Muslim League leader in the Provincial Assembly, to form a Ministry.

<sup>1</sup> These are described in Wheeler-Bennett's biography of King George VI and in *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, a detailed, if highly disingenuous, account of the last months of British rule in India, of Partition and of its aftermath.

That same evening Master Tara Singh,<sup>1</sup> the political leader of the Sikhs, addressed a mass rally in a style of oratory with which India had become depressingly familiar:

O Hindus and Sikhs! Be ready for self-destruction. . . . If we can snatch the Government from the Britishers no one can stop us from snatching the Government from the Muslims. . . . Disperse from here on the solemn affirmation that we shall not allow the League to exist. . . . We shall rule over them and will get the Government, fighting. I have sounded the bugle. Finish the Muslim League.<sup>2</sup>

As in Calcutta and Bihar the previous year, once the flood-gates burst the slaughter was heavy. On March 4 there were thirteen killed and 105 injured in Lahore, and the trouble spread quickly to Amritsar, Attock, Multan and Rawalpindi. On March 5 there were seven killed and eighty-two injured in Lahore; but these, as the police admitted, were only 'provisional figures'. Murder raged unabated for more than a fortnight. When at last the Army—once again the Army—had established control, the score was totted up on March 20, on the eve of Mountbatten's arrival: 2,049 killed and more than a thousand known to be seriously injured.

Nehru toured the Punjab, as in the previous October he had toured Bihar. When he returned to Delhi he said:

I have seen ghastly sights and I have heard of behaviour by human beings which would degrade brutes. All that has happened in the Punjab is intimately connected with political affairs. If there is a grain of intelligence in any person he must realize that whatever political objective he may aim at, this is not the way to attain it. Any such attempt must bring, as it has in a measure brought, ruin and destruction.

There was more, much more, to come; and the Army would go on trying to prevent it and alleviate it to the end.

*Viceroy to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

*22 March 1947*

My dear Commander-in-Chief,

I should like to thank you, and to congratulate those concerned,

<sup>1</sup> A venerable gentleman of deceptively saintly aspect, he owed his title to the fact that he had at one time been a schoolteacher.

<sup>2</sup> *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 339.

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for the excellent work done by the Army in re-establishing control in the Punjab.

I am having a copy of this letter sent to your Hon'ble Member.

Yours sincerely,

WAVELL.

\* \* \*

Before he left London Mountbatten asked to be allowed to take some additional staff with him, in order to assist him in 'a special mission called upon to take unprecedented political and military decisions' in what was at most a quarter of the time allotted to previous Viceregal terms of office. Attlee acceded to this request. Mountbatten thereupon created four new posts never before known on any Viceroy's staff: a Chief of Staff, a Principal Secretary, a Conference Secretary and a Press Attaché. The first two of these were of the utmost importance and were held by men of the highest calibre: General Lord Ismay, who came to this new task from precisely three weeks of retirement; and Sir Eric Miéville, who had recently gone into the City after a distinguished career in the public service, which had included five years as Private Secretary to the Viceroy (1931-6) and eight years as Assistant Private Secretary to the King (1937-45).

Mountbatten, his wife and younger daughter, and his personal staff reached Delhi on March 22. Auchinleck was on the airfield to greet them. Their friendship and respect for each other were real. They had been through a great deal together. Even more testing experiences lay ahead of them. Mountbatten was India's last Viceroy, Auchinleck her last Commander-in-Chief. The names of their predecessors made an august roll stretching back through Britain's imperial past, from the bland Edwardian noonday to the fierce morning glory of the paladins in the era of conquest and expansion. For these two men there waited a different task, the fulfilment of that mission of abnegation, education and training, and the accomplishment of that transference of power so long promised and so long delayed. Who could have told, as they shook hands on Palam airfield that hot March afternoon, that in less than five months British rule in India would have ended, totally and finally?

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Between March 22 and August 15 events moved in India with torrential speed. For Auchinleck there was a brief lull—or what could be called a lull by subsequent standards—while the Viceroy

had his preliminary conversations with the chief political leaders of the country. The list of immediate problems which faced Mountbatten might have daunted the stoutest heart: frenzied communal blood-letting in the Punjab; Muslim League agitation mounting on the North-West Frontier and in Assam; virtual paralysis of the Interim Government; an imminent politico-economic crisis caused by a Budget whose stern taxation proposals looked like splitting Congress's industrialist and socialist wings; a sharp decline in the efficiency of the Administration, accompanied by a deep weariness and perplexity among many senior Civil Servants; a complicated, vague and virtually irreconcilable series of previous pronouncements by the British Government; the Congress demand for a united India which would be a sovereign, independent republic; the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan; the Sikhs' evident and violent determination to resist partition; and the almost fantastically complex question of the future of the six hundred princely States after the lapse of paramountcy.

In all this darkling landscape the Army offered, as Wavell had told the King before he left India, the one flicker of hope. It alone had stood firm through all the mounting chaos of the past year. Yet the politicians could not keep their claws off it, to pull it down, if they could, into the murky, blood-stained spate.

They were back at the issue of the I.N.A., on which, in an excess of perverse sentimentality, Congress and the Muslim League were united, baying and snarling at British military oppression. Under the patient, courteous instruction of Wavell and Auchinleck the party leaders had learned—belatedly—a little sense; but not their followers. A Muslim League back-bencher put down, for debate in the Legislative Assembly on Wednesday, April 2, a resolution calling for the release of all I.N.A. prisoners and the refunding of their forfeited pay and allowances.

Mountbatten held a meeting on April 1 to discuss methods of dealing with this motion. Auchinleck, Nehru, Liaquat Ali Khan and Baldev Singh attended it, and Alan Campbell-Johnson, the Viceroy's Press Attaché, was present (at the Viceroy's request) as *rapporteur*. It gave him, he recorded in his diary, his 'first direct experience of the prevailing political climate at the highest level'—with the unusual variation of a sight of the Muslim League and Congress in alliance. He continued:

Nehru was clearly anxious to be rid of the whole problem, but was naturally worried at the possible strength of the Legislative Assembly's reaction. Liaquat, on the other hand, developed

arguments which were, I felt, calculated to draw heavily on Auchinleck's limited reserves of temper and provoke a breach between the Government and the Commander-in-Chief. None the less, underneath the surface tension it was clear that there was a tremendous respect for Auchinleck and genuine dismay at the threat of his resignation, which had brought the actual crisis to a head. After three hours of intense discussion, a formula was found. Auchinleck was prevailed upon to write it out himself. It invoked the Federal Court as an adviser on the merits of each particular outstanding case.<sup>1</sup>

Early on the following morning Auchinleck set off on a tour of the North-West Frontier Province and the northern Punjab. He was away until April 5. After he had gone a difficulty arose about the formula with which the Government hoped to answer the attack.

*Viceroy to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

3 April 1947

About an hour before the I.N.A. resolution was to be discussed Spens<sup>2</sup> came to the Viceroy's House and said that he and his colleagues were still rather doubtful about the wording of the formula. They had a discussion with Abell and the upshot was that they did not want it to appear from the statement that they were requested to advise by the Commander-in-Chief or report to him. They thought that their position required that the reference should be from the Viceroy and their report should go to him.

2. This makes no practical difference and at our discussion with members of the Cabinet you agreed that the request to advise might come from the Government. To meet the Federal Court's point of view I had to modify the formula at very short notice. The text is attached.

3. I need not tell you that had you been in Delhi I should have consulted you personally, but knowing you would wish to stand by our agreement provided it were not materially altered I went ahead. I hope you agree.

4. Nehru made an excellent speech in the Assembly, backed you up very strongly, paid you a fine tribute, and said that the Government would have to resign if his amendment to the resolution on the lines of the formula was not accepted.

5. The mover of the resolution ultimately withdrew the motion which is a happy outcome.

<sup>1</sup> *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p.53.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Patrick Spens was the Chief Justice of India, 1943-7.

## TRANSFER OF POWER

Thank you so much for your help in this very difficult case.

### *Text of Formula*

Although the Government does not question that in this matter the Commander-in-Chief has acted throughout in good faith and according to his lights for the good of India and the Armed Forces, they are, in view of the special circumstances of the case, prepared to request that the available judges of the Federal Court should be called in as advisers in this matter only and without creating any precedent whatever.

What we have in mind is that before any further consideration is given to the matter by the Commander-in-Chief these advisers should examine the proceedings of the various Courts-Martial, give their opinion as to the desirability of reviewing the findings and sentences in each case, and report whether, in their opinion, the findings and sentences should be altered or modified in any manner.

*Pandit Nehru to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

8 April 1947

Thank you for your letter of the 7th.<sup>1</sup> It was good of you to write to me in such a friendly way and I am grateful to you for it.

It is true I felt a little distressed at what I thought was your lack of faith in our adhering to our word. I did not think of this in any personal sense. And thus there was a sense of weariness at having to discuss the same thing over and over again and repeat the same arguments. As a soldier and a man of action you will appreciate this. I am myself too indifferent a politician to like long-drawn-out talks which end vaguely and without producing results. And yet circumstances have conspired to make me play a politician's role and to indulge in these very arguments.

Yet despite these agreeable and sincere compliments and courtesies, this was not—even yet—the last of this unhappy affair.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is no copy of Auchinleck's letter in his papers.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell-Johnson, whose evidence must always be treated with a measure of reserve, supplies an extraordinary gloss to his account of this episode. In his diary (*Mission With Mountbatten*, pp. 54-5) he records dining on April 4 with Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Zinkin; Zinkin, a member of the Indian Civil Service and at this time Assistant Secretary in the Finance Department, said that 'one possible reason for Nehru's and Congress's support for Auchinleck is the fear that if he resigned he would be succeeded by Slim, who is—rightly or wrongly—regarded as more pro-Muslim. This,

But much mightier affairs were now pressing for consideration. Mountbatten was being forced steadily and rapidly to the conclusion that the partition of the sub-continent was the only solution, and that the idea of a united India could not be sustained except at the cost of a protracted and ruinous civil war. The sympathy and friendship which the Viceroy established with Nehru have long been a matter of history; but they were factors of major importance, and it was significant that Nehru's mind was working in the same direction at the same time. The first official indication however which Auchinleck received that the Cabinet Mission's plan (which, in theory, still held the ground) was to be abandoned and another substituted for it was a Muslim League move.

On April 8, at his daily Staff Meeting, the Viceroy had read aloud a letter from Liaquat Ali Khan, the Finance Member of the Interim Government, drawing attention to what he described as 'the inadequate representation of Muslims in the Armed Forces'. He wanted these reorganized forthwith so that they could be more readily split up between Pakistan and Hindustan<sup>1</sup> at the proper time. Ismay stressed that to take any action on Liaquat's letter would be to prejudice the political issue. Until and unless the Viceroy reported otherwise to His Majesty's Government, the Cabinet Mission plan still held, and that plan envisaged one national Army.

Mountbatten agreed that there could be no splitting of the Indian Army before the withdrawal of the British for two reasons. 'The mechanics won't permit it, and I won't.' . . . Even if it was decided to demit power to individual Provinces, it would still be essential to keep central control of Defence. . . . Abell said the key question was: Is the Cabinet Mission plan dead?<sup>2</sup>

Liaquat was too alert, too resolute and too well versed in the conduct of affairs to walk into a trap, even if it were neatly baited. He prepared a short and formidable document headed boldly:

of course, would also be an explanation of Liaquat's and the Moslem League's readiness to provoke Auchinleck into leaving.<sup>3</sup> The only possible comment on this gossip is that Slim was, by origin, a Gurkha officer and was then Commandant of the Imperial Defence College in London; and that Auchinleck had spent his whole regimental career in the 1/1st Punjab Regiment.

<sup>1</sup> It was convenient and customary, during this final phase, once the idea of Pakistan had become accepted, to refer to the other succession State as Hindustan, though this in fact, after Partition, became the Republic of India.

<sup>2</sup> *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p. 58.

'Preparation of plan for the partition of the Indian Armed Forces'. He went into no matters of detail at all, restated his thesis (which bore no marked relation to the facts) that the representation of Muslims in the Armed Forces was 'grossly inadequate', and remarked blandly:

In order that the constitutional issue should not be prejudged it is necessary to devise a course of action which should not be to the advantage or prejudice of either political party. This neutral position would be obtained by reorganizing the Armed Forces in such a manner that they can be split up when a decision on the partition of the country is taken. An essential preliminary is the preparation of a plan by the Commander-in-Chief and his staff for the partition of the Armed Forces. This will necessarily take some weeks and if taken in hand immediately should be ready by about the time that a decision on the main constitutional issue is reached. The time limit set by H.M.G. demands that no time should be lost in preparing such a plan which will in no way interfere either with the present political negotiations or the present status of the Armed Forces.

Liaquat was strongly entrenched in his position as Finance Member of the Interim Government. He was acting, on the surface, with complete constitutional propriety. But this was a Government deeply divided against itself. Each side was playing for immensely high stakes. The Muslim League members of the Government were in a minority. The Defence Member, Baldev Singh, through whose office this paper had to pass, was a Sikh. In Delhi itself, in the countryside around, and northwards across the great expanse of the Punjab, Muslims and Sikhs were engaged in a sharpening and ever more violent conflict. On the plane of political tactics the Muslim League at this moment appeared to be ringed with enemies, to whom—if they were going to get Pakistan—they could afford to concede nothing. They must strike as vigorously and as incisively as they could, and they must time their blows unerringly.

It is impossible not to admire the skill, the sureness of touch and the tenacity which Liaquat Ali Khan displayed. Second to Jinnah himself, he must be regarded as the creator of Pakistan. For the question of the division of the Armed Forces was the crux of the whole debate. If this fundamental point of principle were to be conceded, then the emergence of an independent Pakistan must inevitably follow. Liaquat's proposition was a rapier thrust at the very heart of the idea of a unitary India.



If the Armed Forces could not be divided, India could not be divided. If they could be split up, India would be bound to be partitioned. It is not to be doubted that Liaquat's communal opponents in the Cabinet appreciated this; why then did they not stand and fight? The implacable answer lay in their own past. The politicians of Congress had spent a lifetime disliking and despising the Indian Army—Nehru, the socialist, the pacifist, the internationalist above all. Through all Nehru's correspondence with Auchinleck, from the moment he entered the Interim Government, despite his courtesy and his sensitivity, he was haunted by his old prejudices. He seized on the traitors, the poltroons and the murderers of the I.N.A. and tried to make national heroes of them. These feeble instruments came apart in his hands. If a politician is to use an army, he must understand what an army is: if an army is to be of use to a politician, it must be a strong army. But Nehru was no Cromwell. Liaquat had him pinned on April 8 and knew it.

On April 18, ten days after Liaquat's letter was read to the Viceroy's Staff Conference, and two days before Auchinleck—going through the correct and constitutional channels—presented his views on the Hon. Finance Member's paper to the Hon. Defence Member, Nehru, in a speech to the All-India States People's Conference, said: 'The Congress . . . have recently on practical considerations passed a resolution accepting the division of the country.'<sup>1</sup> Later in the same month he declared:

The Muslim League can have Pakistan if they want it but on the condition that they do not take away other parts of India which do not wish to join Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

Auchinleck presented his views on Liaquat's paper to the Defence Member on April 20. He was robustly and unequivocally opposed to the Finance Member's suggestion, not on any grounds of affection towards Hindus rather than Muslims, but for sheerly military and administrative reasons. He began his *aide-mémoire* with the round statement:

The Armed Forces of India, as they now stand, cannot be split up into two parts each of which will form a self-contained Armed Force.

He supported this assertion with a wealth of sheer hard, factual

<sup>1</sup> *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 345.

knowledge about the state and composition of the Indian Army, the R.I.N. and the R.I.A.F. and concluded:

... The formation of two separated Armed Forces is not just a matter of redistributing certain classes of men. It is a matter of the greatest complexity and difficulty, not only in the preliminary planning stages but also, and more particularly, in the practical means of bringing any such plan into being.

Any such drastic reorganization would have to be carried out in stages over a period of several years, and during this period there would be no cohesive Armed Force capable of dealing with any serious defensive operations on the North-West Frontier.

Meanwhile it has not been possible to suspend planning on the assumption that H.M.G. will hand over a unified Armed Force. In the absence of any such plan, the cost of the Armed Forces could not have been calculated, demobilization could not have been carried out and provision for the requisite officers, equipment, supplies and accommodation could not have been made.

In short, no plan at all could have been handed over by June 1948.

*As it is likely that any rumour concerning a proposal to divide the Armed Forces would have an immediate and unsettling effect on the morale of the Muslim soldiers, ratings and airmen, it is urged that this matter should not be discussed except on the highest level.*

I wish to stress that in the present state of communal unrest in India any publication of such discussions might well be disastrous to the continued morale and efficiency of the Armed Forces.

Baldev Singh—whether his reasons for doing so were purely disinterested is open to question—supported the Commander-in-Chief stoutly. He too composed a Cabinet paper, which was in large measure a recapitulation of Auchinleck's arguments, and ended with three cogent paragraphs:

... Respect for law and order is rapidly waning. In certain parts, large sections of population have lost confidence in the ability of the police to protect life and property. The only relieving factor in this dark picture is that the integrity of the Armed Forces is still unsullied. Their aid is sought after and welcomed by all everywhere irrespective of group or communal considerations. They, on their part, have fully measured up to the expectations of the Government and the people. It would indeed be an irreparable disaster if a Force such as this was exposed to risks that would not only weaken but ultimately destroy its worth.

For these reasons

(a) I am strongly of the view that the time is not opportune to discuss the proposal of H.M., Finance, in the Defence Committee of India in terms as stated by him.

(b) I cannot agree to suspend the present plans for the reorganization and nationalization of the Armed Forces which, on the other hand, must proceed in view of the urgency of many complex issues that cannot be shelved without serious loss of time and money, and risk of endangering the efficiency of the Forces.

In view of the difficulties I have stated and inherent in this problem at this stage, I would suggest instead that H.E. the Viceroy might informally discuss the issues involved personally with H.M., Finance, or any other Hon'ble Members as he may deem fit.

But by this time Mountbatten himself had decided that there could be no united India except at the cost of a major civil war. He was beginning to hammer out, in his own agile brain and in close and secret conclave with his personal staff, the details of what subsequently became known as the Mountbatten Plan. He perceived quite clearly that this would entail the division of the Armed Forces, to which the opposition by all sections of opinion—except the Muslim League—had been determined.

Mountbatten was anxious for all the expert briefing he could get.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to Viceroy*

*24 April 1947*

You asked me the other day to give you my opinion on the strategic implications of the setting up of an independent Pakistan. I enclose a note which sets out the situation as I see it, taking a long-term view of the problem.

I also enclose a note written by my Deputy Chief of the General Staff setting out a view which might well be taken by the advocates of Pakistan. In my opinion, this view is really a short-term one and does not take into account the potentialities of the future.

The D.C.G.S.'s conclusion was:

It will be agreed that Pakistan is economically a poor country, and that her resources are small. But it can be argued that she will be no poorer than Afghanistan or Persia, who have successfully

retained their independence and preserved their nationality through two world wars.

At the worst, Pakistan can have an army equal to the armies of Afghanistan, Persia or Burma. Within the whole international set-up, why then should she be in a worse position to defend herself?

I suggest that the above is, in outline, the sort of view of the situation that the advocates of Pakistan will take. They will refuse to consider the situation in terms of any threat from a first-class power or in terms of armoured forces or air offensives. They will regard their defence problem in terms of some local third-class war which will be settled one way or another with infantry and artillery.

Auchinleck's view was both wider and less naïve. It did not hold out much hope for Pakistan:

... From the purely military and strategical aspect, which is the only angle from which the problem has been viewed in this paper, it must be concluded that the provision of adequate insurance in the shape of reasonably good defensive arrangements for Pakistan would be a most difficult and expensive business, and that no guarantee of success could be given.

Thursday, April 24, and most of the morning of Friday, April 25, were spent in drafting the plan to transfer power. But no member of the Interim Government was at these meetings. Nor was the Commander-in-Chief. During April 25 the agenda for a meeting of the Defence Committee India and a bundle of relevant documents (Liaquat's paper, Auchinleck's comments and Baldev Singh's comments) were circulated. They went, marked 'Top Secret and Personal', to the Viceroy's Private Secretary, to the Commander-in-Chief, to the Cabinet Secretary, to Nehru, Baldev Singh, Liaquat Ali Khan and five other Ministers.

The Deputy Secretary (Military) of the Cabinet, Brigadier J. G. Elliott, in a covering note, drew attention to Baldev Singh's suggestion that, in order to preserve secrecy, the Viceroy should at this stage only discuss the matter informally with Liaquat Ali Khan and any other members he might think fit. 'Members of the D.C.I. are requested,' the note concluded, 'to treat all these papers as *very specially secret*'.

The Defence Committee India met at six o'clock that evening. Liaquat's paper was item five on the agenda. Mountbatten opened the discussion:

I regret that I have had to override the advice of the Honourable Member for Defence and His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief, and bring this paper before the committee. They have been so impressed with the need for secrecy, because of the disastrous effect on the Armed Forces if it became known that this matter was even under consideration, that they have been reluctant to agree to the matter being discussed at all. I, too, fully appreciate the great importance of ensuring complete secrecy in this matter.

My reasons for bringing the matter to this committee are that I require your views for inclusion in my report to His Majesty's Government as to the form of government I shall recommend for India. Pakistan is an issue which must be faced, and the partition of the Armed Forces is one of its most important implications.

Baldev Singh spoke next. He stood staunchly by what he had written:

Any division of the Forces must follow the political decision in favour of Pakistan—always assuming that that decision is going to be taken. If it precedes such a decision, the consequences may be very serious.

Liaquat Ali Khan said:

I agree that the decision about the Armed Forces must obviously follow the political decision, but there must be a plan in readiness to go ahead with separation if Pakistan is accepted. Also, nothing must be done now which will in any way complicate what is already a difficult problem.

There was then a lengthy general discussion on many of the administrative complications which would present themselves. Auchinleck intervened once, to point out, gently but effectively, that his paper had been written merely in order to explain the practical difficulties, and was not intended in any way to influence the decision for or against Pakistan. 'There are obvious flaws in it,' he said, 'but that is because I've been given no clear terms of reference as to the relations between the two States.'

The Viceroy summed up fully and lucidly. He suggested that the issue should not be put to the Indian Cabinet until the political decision had been taken. He went on to stress the need for secrecy and proposed that those members of the committee who did not

need their papers for subsequent reference should return them to the Cabinet Secretariat at the end of the meeting for safe custody, and that they should be reissued when the subject was again put on the agenda. He thought that the Armed Forces could probably complete nationalization by 1 June 1948 without reducing standards to an unacceptably low level. As an alternative, he felt that the Armed Forces might complete separation by the same date without undue risk. But to attempt both nationalization and separation by that date was, in his opinion, running a very dangerous risk. He stressed the unique position of the Armed Forces and their reputation for impartiality in the existing state of communal tension. He continued :

I bear personal responsibility for law and order. I must carry this until such time as I can hand it over to one or more responsible authorities. While I bear that responsibility I have, in the last resort, the use of British troops to fall back on. After 1 June 1948 there will be no British troops. But the need for reliable and impartial armed forces may still exist. By unduly hastening the process of separation we may defeat our own ends and produce a situation in which the Armed Forces may be semi-organized and not reliable. Much as I should like to see the separation completed, I must emphasize my own doubts as to the possibility of achieving this in the time available, without weakening the Armed Forces. This I cannot possibly accept while I am responsible for law and order.

He threw out a suggestion that the forces of Hindustan and Pakistan might be pooled. Each could have its own G.H.Q., and there could remain a Federal G.H.Q. in general control until such time as separation could be completed without detriment to efficiency.

I agree that there must be a plan, because when Pakistan is announced it will be imperative at once to let the Armed Forces know where they stand, and to reassure them that preparations for their separation are in hand. Perhaps the Commander-in-Chief might make a personal broadcast, indicating how he proposes to proceed.

Finally, Lord Mountbatten put forward the idea of a small high-level staff which should consider, in secret, outline plans for going ahead with partition, if that proved to be necessary, and should think about the possibility of holding up measures of nationalization until the political decision was taken.

Auchinleck said:

What the discussion has brought out is that there is really no basis on which I can plan for separation. So many factors are uncertain. I do agree that I can put in hand—in broad outline—a certain amount of planning. All this can determine is the problem that will have to be tackled and the staff I shall need to do the job. As for nationalization, I agree that that can be temporarily postponed.

The committee then reached their conclusions. They decided that the issue of the separation of the Armed Forces should not be put to the Cabinet until the political decision had been made. They directed Auchinleck to think about both the personnel of the small high-level committee which he ought to set up and the broad outline of the problems this committee would have to tackle. For this purpose he would have to assume that the terms of reference of the committee would be drawn up by the Viceroy on the basis of the political decision. They authorized Auchinleck to hold up nationalization at his discretion until the political decision was reached, his guiding principle being that no action should be taken which would prejudice or complicate separation, should it finally become necessary.

The vitally important fact about this meeting, assessed in the light of history, is that the whole discussion, the Viceroy's summing-up and the committee's decisions were based on two assumptions which nobody challenged: first, *that the earliest conceivable date for the transfer of power was 1 June 1948*; and second, *that since until that date the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, would remain responsible for law and order throughout India, he could not possibly accept any weakening of the Armed Forces.*

This was on the evening of 25 April 1947. What happened between then and 15 August 1947 totally to invalidate these assumptions and expose them as mocking and delusive?

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The path towards the final transference of power, the end of the Raj and the emergence of the two succession States, India and Pakistan, was swift and steep. The principle of partition was accepted by the Viceroy and his staff in the last week of April. Lord Ismay had sounded Jinnah on his reactions to a division of Bengal and the Punjab, both of which were Provinces with a narrow Muslim majority and large non-Muslim minorities.

'Better a moth-eaten Pakistan,' Jinnah answered, 'than no Pakistan at all.'

Of the Hindu leaders, Gandhi alone remained intractably opposed to partition; but he no longer wielded absolute authority. Power had passed to Nehru and Patel, the two outstanding men in the All-India Congress Committee; and they had come, reluctantly, to accept the inevitable.

The three main interests concerned, therefore, the British Government (as represented by the Viceroy), Congress and the League, had reached—wearily but irrevocably—agreement on one basic principle: the transfer of power would not be made to a unitary State. But as late as the evening of April 25, in the Defence Committee India—the most august and powerful policy-making body at that time outside the Interim Government itself—the accepted date for the transfer was 1 June 1948.

On Saturday, April 26, it was decided that Lord Ismay and Abell should fly back to London to secure Cabinet approval of the first draft of Mountbatten's plan, envisaging partition, and to 'hammer it out clause by clause with the Government and officials concerned'.<sup>1</sup>

Lord Ismay was an officer of the Indian Army and one of Claude Auchinleck's oldest friends. Years of his splendid career had been spent far from India, at the centre and fountainhead of power in Britain. Beneath his charm, his suavity of manner and his sophistication, Ismay was a man of deep, tenacious affections and loyalties. He had come back to India, out of retirement, to render one last service to the land in which his youth had been spent. But was this the India he had known?

He said afterwards:

The communal feeling I found, I just did not believe possible. It tore at you, all the time. There was slaughter everywhere. We British had all the responsibility and none of the power. The police force was already undermined, and the Civil Service were frustrated and madly anxious. They were blamed by both Nehru and Jinnah for everything that went wrong.

This was one reason why, to delay partition, would be to increase the disasters. There was another reason: the Viceroy's Executive Council, which had been composed of six or eight wise men, had disappeared. We had instead a Cabinet of nine Congress leaders and five Muslim League leaders who could agree on only one thought—that the British should quit India.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> *Jinnah* by Hector Bolitho, p. 181.



June 1948 was obviously, in Ismay's view, not too early for the transfer of power, but too late. It would not, he believed, be possible to achieve an orderly hand-over to 'a government that barely existed, a civil service torn by internal strife, and many millions of people intent on killing each other. The perils were inevitable: with delay, they would only increase.'<sup>1</sup>

The evidence to support this view accumulated rapidly in the week which elapsed before Ismay and Abell set off for London. On Sunday, April 27, George Abell, who had been up to Lahore, returned and told the Viceroy that Sir Evan Jenkins considered that there was a grave danger of civil war. Abell asked Jenkins whether there was any alternative to a British withdrawal in June 1948; Jenkins said that there was none, but that there was a real peril that the hand-over would be made to chaos. On Monday, April 28, the Mountbattens set off on a brief, exacting and at times dangerous tour of the North-West Frontier and the Punjab.

On Tuesday, April 29 Auchinleck flew to London. He too had come to accept the fact that there was no alternative to partition. Its strategical and administrative consequences would be vast. The administrative burden he would have to shoulder alone; but it was essential that he should make clear to the Government in London and to the Chiefs of Staff his view of its effects on British, Commonwealth and Allied world strategy. He spent some time in London on this task, and then took several days' delayed leave in Switzerland.

Meanwhile, events moved at breakneck speed in India. Mountbatten was back in Delhi on the evening of Wednesday, April 30. His wife, whose fearlessness was of great moral and indeed political significance at this time, continued her tour of the riot areas. On Thursday the Viceroy's Staff Meeting had a long discussion<sup>2</sup> on the question of India remaining within the Commonwealth, and on the consequences if—after partition—one part of India decided to stay and one part to go.

There were significant differences of approach to this intensely important question, out of which in the end emerged the solution to the whole problem of the transference of power. Mountbatten was firmly opposed to the idea of one part only remaining in the Commonwealth, with the consequent risk of Britain being involved in the support of one Indian sovereign State against another; only British India as a whole, he held, should be permitted to remain in the Commonwealth.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> See *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p. 81.

Ismay argued that it would be virtually impossible, on moral as much as on material grounds, to eject from the Commonwealth any part of India that might ask to remain in it. If Pakistan were involved, he foresaw grave effects in the whole Islamic world, including the Middle East. British backing, he said, if not of the whole then of a part of India, might be the one way to avoid a civil war.

Abell, like Ismay, was conscious that Britain would have a continuing moral responsibility, but said that the worst way of fulfilling it might be the unilateral support of Pakistan.

Miéville pointedly drew attention to the obligations of the Commonwealth nations under the Statute of Westminster, and then—almost as an afterthought—added that V. P. Menon had told him that Patel might be ready to accept an offer of Dominion status for the time being. V. P. Menon, at that time Reforms Commissioner to the Government of India, was one of the ablest senior members of the Indian Civil Service. His relations with the Congress leaders, particularly Patel, were close and cordial. The idea of Dominion status as a way out of the deadlock was Menon's. Before Wavell's departure Menon had seen Patel and pointed out that an agreed form of partition was the only alternative to a continuation and expansion of civil war. He argued that so long as Congress held out for a united India and complete separation:

... the Viceroy ... the civil and military services and London would support the League. Partition, with both India and Pakistan as Dominions, would eliminate the League's preferred status with the British, would facilitate parliamentary approval of the transfer of power and would restore the Congress to the good graces of Delhi.<sup>1</sup>

Menon therefore propounded the formula of Indian acceptance of Dominion status for the time being; Patel was impressed and said that he approved it. It is indicative of the atmosphere which surrounded Indian politics at this time that Patel did not tell Nehru.

Menon's analysis of the British attitude was biased and inaccurate, but it had led him to a workable formula, on which Mountbatten's alert brain seized. On the morning of Wednesday, May 7, the Viceroy went to Simla for several days, taking V. P. Menon with him. By this time Menon had been fully apprised of Mountbatten's interest in his proposal and had secured Nehru's approval for it. In the afternoon, at a meeting which Menon

<sup>1</sup> *Nehru, A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 346. See also *The Transfer of Power in India* by V. P. Menon, pp. 358-65.

attended, it was discussed at some length. Menon 'confirmed both Patel's and Nehru's positive approach to the subject'; he also said that it would be necessary to drop the terms 'King-Emperor' and 'Empire', to which many Indians objected. Menon

... was finally asked to prepare a paper setting out the procedure whereby a form of Dominion Status could be granted to India under the alternative Plans of Partition and Demission.<sup>1</sup>

By the morning of Friday, May 9, the Dominion status solution had acquired, in Mountbatten's mind, the utmost urgency and importance. The processes by which he had reached this conclusion were these: the Cabinet Mission plan, to all intents and purposes, was dead by April 22, when Mountbatten himself had begun to think in terms of Dominion status but could not see how it could be achieved; the reports of various Provincial Governors, his own and his wife's experiences in the strife-torn areas, and Ismay's reactions and opinions, all convinced him, between April 28 and May 5, that to delay the transfer of power until June 1948 would prolong the civil war and create conditions of greater chaos even than then existed; Ismay and Abell went to London, their minds—and hearts—full to overflowing with the sense of urgent need to avert this enlargement of the disaster; V. P. Menon came upon the scene with a possibly feasible solution—if the opposing sides could be brought to accept it.

All the forces which could bring about a break—albeit a profoundly convulsive break—in the deadlock were now converging and compelling a decision: Ismay in London persuading the Cabinet that there would be appalling consequences if the transfer of power were delayed, supplied the moral and emotional impulse; Mountbatten in Simla gave the energy and the drive towards radical and ruthless action; V. P. Menon offered the practical formula.

At his Staff Conference on Friday, May 9 Mountbatten said that he thought it

... most desirable that if Dominion status was to be granted to India before June 1948 the grant should in fact take place during 1947. He went so far as to say that he would like to see Dominion status by 31 December 1947. ...<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p. 86. Campbell-Johnson recorded these events in his diary at the time casually, with little recognition of their decisive significance. This very casualness lends authenticity, if not objectivity, to his narrative.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

Nehru arrived in Simla during that Friday, accompanied by his new adviser and close friend, Krishna Menon. This remarkable individual, who was no relation of V. P. Menon, had lived as an expatriate in London for many years. He was a barrister and a journalist, and on the eve of his departure for his homeland early in 1947 he was a leading Socialist member of the St. Pancras Borough Council and Chairman of its Public Libraries Committee. When he returned to London in August it was as his country's High Commissioner. His influence on Nehru at this time was great, but far from helpful.

His first move was to resist any splitting of the Army if early Dominion status were accepted. But adroit as he was, he was too late by a little over a fortnight. In principle, the idea of a division of the Army had been accepted on April 25; and on this, however grim a prospect it held out, there was no going back.

\* \* \*

The details of the political manoeuvres, tergiversations and somersaults of the next few weeks are not the direct concern of this narrative. The decision reached was a sheerly political one; all other considerations—administrative, military and strategical—were flung overboard. There is no evidence to show that, after April 25, the Commander-in-Chief was consulted again as to policy: he was simply given his instructions and told to carry them out. This is not to be construed as a deliberate affront either to Auchinleck or to the Armed Forces which he commanded; but it was the expression of an extraordinary and unprecedented revolution in fundamental attitudes on the part of the Viceroy.

On April 25, with 1 June 1948 firmly in his mind as the earliest possible date for the transfer of power, Mountbatten had warned the Defence Committee India, in the most solemn and explicit terms, that by hastening the process of separation of the Armed Forces they might defeat their own ends and produce a situation in which the Forces might be semi-organized and not reliable, and had said that he could not possibly accept a weakening of the Army, the R.I.N. and the R.I.A.F. so long as he remained responsible for law and order.

On May 9 he had come to regard 31 December 1947 as a practicable date for the termination of British rule. During May 10-11 he showed Nehru a version of his Partition Plan which, with Ismay's help and advice on the spot in London, had been revised by the British Government. Nehru's objections to this revised plan—he

insisted that constitutionally 'Hindustan' should be regarded as the successor of the Government of India, and that Pakistan should have the legal status of a seceder nation, and he made his point—led, first, to a postponement of the public announcement of the plan from May 17 to June 2 and second, to the Viceroy's making a rapid journey to London.

Prodigious, all-consuming haste thereafter became the dominant characteristic of this astonishing and momentous operation. It had taken more than two centuries to build up the Indian Empire, and to give to the sub-continent a unitary political and constitutional structure. The whole structure was demolished in exactly two and a half months.

Mountbatten and Auchinleck returned to Delhi on May 31. Mountbatten's arguments in London, added to those of Ismay and Abell, had convinced the British Government that the most rapid and drastic solution was the only solution. The Government therefore agreed to the proposal to establish two self-governing Dominions of India and Pakistan, equal in all respects with the other member States of the Commonwealth and both having the right, in accordance with the Statute of Westminster, to decide whether or not they remained in the Commonwealth. The chief physical and ethnological difficulties in the way of a clean-cut division between the two new States lay, as they had always lain, in Bengal and the Punjab. The final decision in respect of partition was left to the votes of the Provincial Governments of the Punjab and Bengal and it was agreed that, in the event of a favourable vote, a Boundary Commission would be appointed. Mountbatten also persuaded the British Government, at the end of May, to put the necessary legislation through Parliament before the summer recess.

On June 2 Mountbatten, after ceaseless activity behind the scenes, announced his plan to the Indian political leaders and obtained the agreement of Nehru and his Congress colleagues and the tacit acquiescence of Jinnah. On June 3, in London and in Delhi, these enormous decisions were made public. In Delhi the Viceroy, Nehru, Jinnah and Baldev Singh—these three as a result of Mountbatten's cajolery—made broadcasts explaining the decisions and asking for public co-operation through the transition period.

Nehru, that strange and complex being who had told Auchinleck that though not a politician he was forced to play a politician's part, had a poet's appreciation of the terrible grandeur, at once challenging and tragic, of the vast enterprise on which, at headlong speed, they were now embarking. And into the microphone in the hot, crowded little studio at All-India Radio, while the technicians

flustered about with voice tests and timing for later speakers, he uttered a single sentence whose poignancy must echo down the generations to come.

'We are little men,' he said, 'serving great causes, but because that cause is great something of that greatness falls upon us also.'

\* \* \*

But the sense of greatness was to be recaptured only through travail and tribulation. What of that final bastion of stability, that one final breakwater against the rising tides of communal hatred, fratricidal conflict, social and civil chaos, the Indian Army? That too was for division and demolition. The politicians scorned it in the days of its strength and its victory; in their own hour of self-absorbed and self-conscious triumph they ignored it, pushed it aside as of minor importance, and treated it as one more insignificant item of office equipment, as easily disposed of as the telephones, the typewriters and the filing cabinets, over which there was to be such fierce haggling in the next few weeks. A time would come when they would wring their hands and cry for the Army they had despised and rejected; and even then, so great a mercy were they granted in their blind, angry folly, they did not cry in vain.

On June 4 the Viceroy held a Press conference in the Legislative Assembly in New Delhi for some three hundred Indian and foreign journalists. In the course of this conference he 'gave the first informal indication that August 15 would be the likely date for the actual transfer of power to the new Dominions'.<sup>1</sup>

There followed, for Auchinleck and his small, heavily depleted and grossly overworked staff, weeks of the most arduous and concentrated endeavour in the full heat of summer. Administratively alone—apart from its emotional undertones and its political overtones—the task which he had been set was of nightmare complexity. A delicate and elaborate operation which it ought to have taken at least a year to perform had to be hustled through in under two months.

The motive power behind the relentless speed which characterized the British withdrawal from India was Mountbatten's. He believed, and he had convinced the British Government, that this was the only way in which it could be done. He also believed that only the shock of realizing that the British were going, and going at once,

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 109.

would bring the opposing sides in India to face the consequences and accept their own responsibilities.

A Punjabi, a magistrate grown old in the British service, observed sadly in the autumn of 1947:

The British are a just people. They have left India in exactly the same state of chaos as they found it.<sup>1</sup>

This was a natural enough verdict against the immediate background of that terrible time, but it cannot be regarded, in historical terms, as a fair or adequate assessment of British motives and actions. It was not fair to the British Government or the Viceroy: it was harshly unjust to the Commander-in-Chief and the British officers of the Indian Army.

The first effect of the Viceroy's shock treatment was to numb the senses of the Indian leaders. They went on repeating, like men in a trance, the movements and gestures which had become habitual over years. The Viceroy and his staff therefore gave them a second shock, a memorandum entitled 'The Administrative Consequence of Partition'.

To divide the personnel, assets and liabilities of the great and cumbrous structure of the Indian Empire in the brief period—seventy-two days precisely—which remained before the transfer of power, a Partition Council was set up and held its first meeting on June 13, ten days after the promulgation of the Mountbatten Plan. It consisted of two representatives each of the succession States, which were now described officially as India and Pakistan, and its president was the Viceroy. It appointed a Steering Committee of two. These were two Indian members of the Indian Civil Service, nominated respectively by the Congress and Muslim League representatives on the Council; they were H. M. Patel, who was the Cabinet Secretary, and Mohammed Ali, Financial Adviser in the Military Finance Department. They were conspicuously able, had often worked closely together, and were on the best of terms with each other.

Through them ten Expert Committees, composed of officials only, submitted recommendations to the Partition Council. The separation of the Armed Forces, and the control of and responsibility for them during the period of transition, presented their own specially grave problems which called for special treatment.

The first step was the establishment of an Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee and a Joint Defence Council. Auchinleck, in a

<sup>1</sup> *The Making of Pakistan* by Richard Symonds, p. 74.

report which he subsequently submitted to the British Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff, said:

The term 'Reconstitution' was specifically adopted in order to avoid what was at the time considered likely to be the adverse psychological effect of the term 'division' on the Indian officers and men who had for so long regarded themselves as a closely integrated and unified body, whatever their creed or class.

Auchinleck put up his proposals for the Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee to the Viceroy on June 11. With these proposals<sup>1</sup> there was a covering note of some significance:

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to General Lord Ismay* 11 June 1947

I can not stress too strongly my conviction that the success of any plan for the division of the Indian Armed Forces depends on the willing co-operation of the British officers now serving with them, the great majority of whom it will be essential to retain during the process of reconstitution.

The goodwill of British officers is more likely to be secured if the Partition Committee—on behalf of the future Governments of Hindustan and Pakistan—openly state that the services of British officers are essential to the success of reconstitution, notwithstanding the 'Quit India' cry of the past, and request them to remain in positions of command and on the staff during the period of the reconstitution of the Armed Forces.

I hope that this may be done, as I am not at all certain in my own mind that the requisite number of British officers will wish to stay on, and I am most strongly opposed to the application of any form of compulsion to them.

Without Auchinleck's personal leadership and his selfless devotion to duty, the whole complex enterprise would have foundered at the outset. One of Nehru's biographers said that 'British Officers generally were opposed'<sup>2</sup> to the division of the Armed Forces. The truth is that, whatever their dismay, alarm, sorrow, or disbelief in the practicability of that division, they all co-operated loyally and held their personal feelings in check.

On this troubled scene there arrived, on June 23, for a three-day visit to India, the new C.I.G.S., Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery. He was markedly ignorant of India and Indian conditions. Although

<sup>1</sup> The text of which is not included in the Auchinleck papers.

<sup>2</sup> Nehru, *A Political Biography* by Michael Brecher, p. 350.



he was splendidly entertained by the Viceroy, and had conversations with both Nehru and Jinnah, it cannot be said that his intervention was helpful or constructive.

Montgomery noted in his diary on June 24 that partition at such a speed raised terrific problems, and prophesied that if these were not settled by the closest co-operation between the two Dominions, there would be 'the most awful chaos and much bloodshed'.<sup>1</sup> He was quite right; but so were those who, with much more knowledge, experience and insight, had been making the same sombre prophecy for months past, and had been trying to bring about that co-operation. Montgomery merely formed the impression (and recorded it) that Jinnah had an intense distrust of Auchinleck and hated Mounbatten. His visit, he asserted, had two purposes: first, to settle the programme for the withdrawal of British troops; and second, to get agreement for the continued use of Gurkha troops in the British Army after India had gained her independence.<sup>2</sup> The first was the constitutional responsibility and close concern of the Commander-in-Chief in India; on the second matter Auchinleck had been negotiating for many months and had concluded an entirely satisfactory agreement which subsisted for many years afterwards.

On July 1 Auchinleck sent to Mounbatten a copy of a letter he had received from a Sikh in Delhi, who pointed out that, while the 7th Sikhs were still in the Basra area protecting British oil installations in Persia,

... during these twelve months tragic events have occurred in their homeland which have upset the minds of our Sikh brothers abroad. When India is being divided our men should be home with their kinsfolk. I trust you will issue orders for speedy return to their home before the August drama unfolds itself.

This was an indication of the ominous atmosphere which surrounded every aspect of Auchinleck's work in these days.

Early in July it was possible to begin the detailed planning of the division of the Armed Forces of India. On July 5 Auchinleck gave the members of the Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee their terms of reference:

In close consultation with the Steering Committee acting under the orders of the Partition Council, to make proposals for the division of the existing Armed Forces of India, namely, the Royal

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs* by Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery, p. 457.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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Indian Navy, the Indian Army and the Royal Indian Air Force (including the various installations, establishments and stores owned by the present Defence Department of the Government of India). . .

The committee will work on the following assumptions:

1. Existing members of the Armed Forces serving in either State will be governed by their existing terms and conditions of service. If, subsequently, new terms are promulgated and if they do not desire to serve on the new terms, they will be allowed to terminate their services and proportionate benefits will be admissible in the case of permanent personnel.

2. Any Indian officers or other ranks it may be necessary to engage for service in the Armed Forces between now and the date of the transfer of power should be engaged under existing terms and conditions of service, with the option of resigning from the service should they not wish to serve on under any new terms or conditions which may be imposed by the new Dominion Governments.

3. The liability for non-effective charges in respect of pensions, gratuities, annuities, etc. earned by Indian officers and other ranks of the three Services prior to the transfer of authority to the new Dominion Governments will be undertaken by these Governments and publicly so announced.

4. Except as demanded by the processes of reconstitution of the Armed Forces, there shall be no changes in the basic organization and nomenclature of formations, units, establishments and installations of the three Services, or in the class composition of units until such reconstitution is completed.

5. For the successful division of the Armed Forces the services of a number of British officers now serving in them will be required. Therefore the implementation of the plan for complete nationalization may take longer than was anticipated.

There was a note attached to the terms of reference describing the principles on which the work of the committee was to be based:

1. The division of the Indian Armed Forces is bound to be a complicated process. If it is to be accomplished without confusion and without any marked loss of morale and efficiency, it is essential that all the existing forces in India should be under a single administrative control until:

(a) they have been finally sorted out into two distinct forces; and

(b) the two Governments are in a position to administer, i.e. to pay, feed, clothe and equip their respective forces.

2. On the other hand, it is essential that the Union of India and Pakistan should have each, within their own territories, forces which:

(a) are with effect from August 15 under their own operational control;

(b) are on August 15 predominantly composed of non-Muslims and Muslims respectively; and

(c) are as soon as possible after August 15 predominantly reconstituted on a territorial basis.

3. The requirements set out in paragraph (c) above necessitate that partition should be in two stages. The first stage would be a more or less rough and ready division of the existing forces on a communal basis. Plans should be made forthwith for the immediate movement to the Pakistan area of all Muslim majority units that may be outside that area, and similarly for the movement to India of all exclusively non-Muslim or non-Muslim majority units at present in the Pakistan area. In moving units to the Pakistan area, non-Muslim companies would as far as practicable be detached, and similarly Muslim companies would be detached from units being moved into the rest of India.

4. The next stage would be to comb out the units themselves on the basis of voluntary transfers. All personnel now serving in the Armed Forces would be entitled to elect which Dominion they choose to serve in. To this, however, there would be one exception, namely, that a Muslim from Pakistan now serving in the Armed Forces will not have the option to join the Armed Forces of the Indian Union, and similarly a non-Muslim from the rest of India now serving in the Armed Forces will not have the option to join the Armed Forces of Pakistan. There will however be no objection to non-Muslim personnel from Pakistan and Muslim personnel from the rest of India electing to serve in the Armed Forces of the Indian Union and of Pakistan respectively. The serving personnel will have the option to resign if they do not wish to serve in the Armed Forces of either Dominion.

While this reconstitution is being carried out, arrangements should be put in train to ensure that each Dominion shall have as soon as possible its own administrative machinery to enable it to maintain its own Armed Forces. It is not until these two processes have been completed that central administrative control can be dispensed with. Every effort should be made not only to complete the reconstitution of units, but also to provide each

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Dominion with its own administrative and maintenance services for its own Armed Forces by 1 April 1948, thus making it possible to dispense with central administrative control by that date. This of course does not preclude arrangements or agreements between the two Governments for sharing any administrative or training establishments.

5. If both Governments are to have operational control over their respective Armed Forces by August 15, they must each have heads for the three Services, i.e. the Navy, the Army and the Air Force, and headquarters staffs through which to exercise their functions. It is therefore important that these six heads should be selected forthwith and that they should have authority to begin setting up their headquarters so as to be ready to take over command by August 15. The heads of these Services will be directly responsible to their respective Ministries through their Defence Ministers and will have executive control of all the forces in their territories.

6. So far as central administration is concerned, the Indian Armed Forces as a whole will remain under the administrative control of the present C.-in-C. in India who in his turn will be under the Joint Defence Council. This Council will consist of:

- (a) Governor-General or Governors-General;
- (b) the two Defence Ministers; and
- (c) the C.-in-C. in India.

If for any reason either or both of the Defence Ministers are unable to attend, another Minister or Ministers might attend in their place and, further, each Defence Minister (or the Minister acting for him) will be entitled to call in one other Minister and experts to assist him, if he so chooses.

The Commander-in-Chief in India will have no responsibility for law and order, nor will he have operational control over any units, save those in transit from one Dominion to another; nor will he have any power to move troops *within* the borders of either Dominion.

7. In order to avoid confusion, the existing C.-in-C. in India might be entitled Supreme Commander from August 15 until his work is completed. His existing staff would of course be reduced progressively as his functions diminish.

An annexure to this document set out the methods by which the Army—and the Navy and Air Forces—would have to be controlled throughout the period of reconstitution. It emphasized the key position of the Joint Defence Council and of G.H.Q. India,

which would, after August 15, become the Supreme Commander's Headquarters. Continuity of maintenance and administration could only be ensured by the retention of central control by this Headquarters. 'If there is no central control, confusion and even chaos is almost certain to ensue to the detriment of the welfare, morale and contentment of the troops.'

These were the factors which, to the end, seemed of paramount importance to the professional soldiers who had served India all their lives. The politicians and the hate-maddened mobs, however, had other aims in view.

On the British side the portentous process of undoing, legally and constitutionally, the work of centuries, went on apace. The Indian Independence Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on Friday, July 4. Its twenty clauses provided for the creation of two new Dominions on 15 August 1947, to whose Governments were to be transferred all the powers hitherto exercised by the British Government in India, except that of paramountcy in treaty relations with the Princely States. Each Dominion was to be headed by a Governor-General, but one of the stipulations of the Bill was that one person might serve in a dual capacity. This clause was inserted in the hope that Mountbatten might be acceptable to both new Dominions.

But on July 5 Ismay again flew to London for consultations with the Prime Minister, and to report (among many other matters of great gravity) that Pakistan did not wish Mountbatten to be its first Governor-General. Ismay was in London for a fortnight; on his way back to Delhi by air he dictated a personal progress report to his secretary. Certain of his observations in this report were subsequently published.<sup>1</sup> He described the partition of the Armed Forces as 'the biggest crime and the biggest headache' and added:

It is just possible that two really good armies will emerge from the process. It is true that they will not in sum total be equal to the single army out of which they have been fashioned.

He pinned considerable hopes on the work of the Joint Defence Council. How far these hopes were in excess of fulfilment was soon to be seen.

Less than a month before the date irrevocably fixed for the transfer of power, while Auchinleck was labouring to preserve the morale and spirit of the Indian Army which it was now his duty to divide, Nehru was again niggling and nagging away about the I.N.A.:

<sup>1</sup> *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p. 137.

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*Pandit Nehru to Admiral Mountbatten*

19 July 1947

You will remember that the case of the I.N.A. prisoners was considered at length some time ago and ultimately it was decided to refer it to the judges of the Federal Court. I made a statement to this effect in the Legislative Assembly. I do not know how far this consideration by the Federal Court judges has proceeded and when we are likely to have their recommendations.

As you will no doubt appreciate, an entirely new situation arises, because of the political changes that have taken place. Normally speaking it would be entirely inappropriate for any political prisoners, or those who are considered as political prisoners, to be kept in prison after the declaration of Indian independence. There would be a widespread feeling among the people that this independence was not real and was only a façade if such prisoners continued to be detained. It seems to me essential therefore that on or before August 15 I.N.A. prisoners should be released. I am quite certain that if this release does not take place, the matter will be raised in the Constituent Assembly which will be functioning then as a sovereign Legislative Assembly.

There is another aspect of this case. It is possible that the Pakistan Government may take some action in this matter and release the prisoners in their charge. If this happens, as it very probably will, then the retention in prisons at the instance of the India Government would be very difficult if not impossible, and would give rise to tremendous public opinion.

In view of this situation I wish to suggest to you that very early steps should be taken to release these prisoners. This can be done quite appropriately and without any reference to the past in view of the new political status of India. If this is not done soon, a new public demand will arise and then we shall have to do it in response to that demand. It is thus far better to keep the initiative with ourselves than to be compelled by circumstances to take action.

The Viceroy's Private Secretary sent this amiable missive to Auchinleck with a request for his advice.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to Sir George Abell*

21 July 1947

I note that the Chief Justice is being asked to expedite the report of the Federal Judges' Committee on these cases.

I do not agree with all the statements made by Pandit Nehru in his letter. It is not a fact that an entirely new situation has arisen because of the political changes that have taken place. A

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new situation undoubtedly will arise but the political changes causing it have not yet taken place so the situation has not yet arisen.

Furthermore, it is not correct to say that the 'I.N.A.' convicts are in jail for political offences. They were convicted of crimes such as murder and brutal conduct, and not for any political reason.

I am prepared to put into effect without question any recommendations that the Judges' Committee may make, but I can not agree to take independent action for the summary release of these men on the grounds of purely political expediency. There is no logical reason at all that I can see why this should be done and I recommend most strongly that it should not be done.

On August 15 either or both the Dominion Governments will be at liberty to take any action they like in the matter.

\* \* \*

On July 10 the House of Commons gave the Indian Independence Bill its second reading. It passed through its final stages with great celerity and without a division, and became law on July 18.

At the beginning of August new Commanders-in-Chief were appointed for the Armed Forces in the new countries. The Pakistan Army's first C.-in-C. was General Sir Frank Messervy, who had begun his soldiering career in Hodson's Horse in 1914. The new Army of India was headed by a Scot, General Sir Rob Lockhart, who had first joined the 51st Sikhs, Frontier Force, in March of that same year.

On 4 August 1947 Auchinleck addressed to these brother-officers and friends of more than thirty years this letter:

Please accept my warmest congratulations on your new appointment.

I wish you every success and all good fortune in your vital and difficult task.

If reconstitution of the Armed Forces is to be carried out rapidly and efficiently and without friction, we shall all of us, in your Headquarters and mine, have to work together in the closest co-operation and with the firm intention of doing all we can to help each other in our common task. I have already impressed this necessity on the officers who are to serve on my staff when I become Supreme Commander, and I am sure you will do the same with yours.

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The strongest possible spirit of friendliness and co-operation will also be essential between the Armed Forces Headquarters of the two Dominions. I shall be glad if this may be specially impressed on the British officers detailed to serve under you as I feel that we must all work as one team with one object.

You will hardly need any assurance on my part that you will receive from me and my Headquarters all the help that we can give you and that we shall have no other aim than to serve you and to help you to put your house in order with the least possible delay. . . .

You are, I think, aware that I, as Supreme Commander, have been made responsible by His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom for the command and administration of all British Forces staying in India after August 15. I have been empowered to report direct to the Chiefs of Staff in the United Kingdom in all matters concerning the administration, employment and well-being of these Forces.

I shall exercise this responsibility through the G.O.C. British Troops in India and Pakistan and the A.O.C.-in-C. at Supreme Commander's Headquarters. . . .

Official instructions will shortly be issued under the authority of the Joint Defence Council, of which I am a member, and by myself as Supreme Commander, defining the duties and powers of the Joint Defence Council, the Supreme Commander and the Commanders of the Dominion Forces during the process of Reconstitution.

The position can not be other than complicated and the relationships will not always be easy to define, but I have no doubt that we shall be able to work in harmony and the closest co-operation, remembering that a spirit of give and take is the best solvent of most problems. In this way we shall, I hope, have no difficulty in achieving our common object, which is to reconstitute the Armed Forces of India with the minimum of disturbance and delay and the maximum of efficiency in the equal interest of both Dominions.

Good luck to you.

On the same day, in far-off Aberdeen, the Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University<sup>1</sup> wrote to Auchinleck:

On October 21 next we are to instal Field-Marshal Earl Wavell

<sup>1</sup> Sir William Hamilton Fyfe.



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as Chancellor of this University. It is his wish, and the wish of the Senatus Academicus, that you should be present on that occasion and receive from the Chancellor the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, the highest distinction which the University can award.

I very much hope it may be possible for you to be in this country at the time of the Chancellor's installation, but, if not, I hope you will come and receive the degree at some later date.

Eleven days later British rule in India ended. On the eve of this momentous happening, Jawaharlal Nehru began a speech in the Constituent Assembly in New Delhi with the words:

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.

Jinnah, entering Government House in Karachi for the first time as Governor-General, said to his A.D.C.:

Do you know, I never expected to see Pakistan in my lifetime. We have to be very grateful to God for what we have achieved.

The politicians' phrases and praises abounded. Their sentiments were elevating in the extreme. Other men, who had loved India no less, responded differently. Auchinleck was not normally sparing of words. On this occasion he was markedly reticent:

### SPECIAL INDIA ARMY ORDER

by

His Excellency Field-Marshal Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck,  
G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E.,  
Commander-in-Chief in India

*New Delhi, 14 August 1947*

S.I.A.O. 79/S/47. Discontinuance of India Army Orders.

This is the last India Army Order.

R. A. SAVORY, Lieutenant-General,  
Adjutant-General in India

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### Latest of Many Services

On the late evening of 13 August 1947, a small party of British officers went to the Residency in Lucknow, on the flagstaff of which there had always flown, day and night since the memorable siege of 1857, a Union Jack. They watched the warrant officer in charge of the Residency haul the flag down. The flagstaff and its base were demolished during the night by British sappers, and the flag was sent to Auchinleck.

On August 15 King George VI, no longer King-Emperor, received his last Secretary of State for India, the Earl of Listowel,<sup>1</sup> at Balmoral. He had but one personal request. He asked that this flag might be presented to him so that it should hang at Windsor alongside other historic flags. Some six weeks later this wish was fulfilled.

\* \* \*

The British no longer ruled in India. Their power and their authority they had handed over at midnight on August 14-15 to the Governments of India and Pakistan. Lord Mountbatten was installed as the first Governor-General of the new India, the Qaid-i-Azam as the first Governor-General of Pakistan. Cries of 'Jai Hind!' and 'Pakistan Zindabad!' rent the air. For twenty-four hours or so there was amiable rejoicing, much laughter, much shaking of hands and patting of backs. Freedom had been won. And then the unpaid bills began to come in.

In the weeks that followed Auchinleck rendered his final services to the people he had lived and worked amongst so long, and his first services to the new nations which he had laboured to help bring to birth. These were manifold and remarkable in kind. For the position which he held there was no precedent. A careful attempt to define it had been made in a Governor-General's Order (which had the force of an Act of Parliament) published in one of the last issues of the *Gazette of India* on Monday, 11 April 1947.

<sup>1</sup> He had succeeded Lord Pethick-Lawrence in April.

He derived his authority from this, the Joint Defence Council Order 1947. Through the Joint Defence Council, which it formally established, he was responsible to the Governments of India and Pakistan for the efficient execution of a formidable series of tasks all concerned with the fair and orderly division of the former Indian Forces between the two Dominions and their reconstitution as two separate Dominion Forces. He was also directly responsible to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom for the control, disposition, discipline and welfare of all British Forces remaining in the sub-continent. He and all British officers in the former Indian Armed Forces were transferred, the moment the Order came into effect, to the appropriate British Service. Auchinleck was responsible for the allocation to the service of either Dominion of such officers as elected to stay on during the period of transition. He was therefore the legally constituted embodiment of such British authority as, of necessity, remained in the sub-continent after the transfer of political power.

The anomalies of his position were many and obvious, but they had been forced upon him and upon the two new Governments by the speed at which the transfer of political power had been effected. Had the original time-table been adhered to, it might have been just possible to divide and reconstitute the Armed Forces for the two Dominions and to withdraw all British troops before the given date. There would then have been no need for a British Supreme Commander, and Auchinleck could have gone in peace. As it was, he had to stay and strive to exercise his allotted responsibility in the midst of civil war and administrative chaos which—with the exception of the disturbances in one important and specified area—it was no part of his right or duty to try to control. In his career he had more than once been the victim of men who had power without responsibility. He now had to endure the bitter experience of holding responsibility without power.

The exception just mentioned was the Punjab. When, under the Mountbatten Plan, it was decided to establish the two new Dominions, the final decision in respect of partition was left to the votes of the Provincial Governments of the Punjab and Bengal, and it was agreed that, in the event of their opting for partition, a Boundary Commission would be appointed. Bengal voted in favour of partition on June 20, the Punjab on June 23. Two Boundary Commissions were therefore set up, both headed by the distinguished English lawyer Sir Cyril (later Lord) Radcliffe. While both Commissions operated under extreme difficulty, with such total disagreement between their Hindu and Muslim members that Radcliffe had (like Solomon) to make the decisions alone, at least in

Bengal the flames of violence had guttered down. But in the Punjab they blazed. Even through all the haste and scurry of the transfer of power it was appreciated that there was likely to be serious trouble over the Boundary Award. In July, therefore, the Partition Council requested Auchinleck to set up a neutral force to assist the civil power to maintain law and order in the disputed area. He accordingly constituted the Punjab Boundary Force, to work directly under his orders, and responsible, through him, to the Joint Defence Council. As its commander he selected Pete Rees, who, after a distinguished and memorable period in command of the 19th (the 'Dagger') Indian Division in Burma, had for nearly two years been commander of 4th Indian Division.

Auchinleck had thus vested in him a triple responsibility: the orderly reconstitution of the successor States' Armed Forces, the safe and seemly withdrawal of the remaining British troops and—as a temporary but urgent measure of expediency—the maintenance of law and order in the troubled region of the Punjab. The fulfilment of these tasks was bound to be difficult enough, in all conscience; but Auchinleck might just have achieved it had he been given time, and the trust and backing of the Governments of the successor States—and, it is necessary to add, the resolute support of Lord Mountbatten. All these essential factors were lacking.

Once more—and for the last time—Auchinleck was bidden to perform the almost impossible (by those who had never clearly envisaged the consequences of their orders), refused the wherewithal to do it, and deprived of the political backing which he had a right to be given. A universal-suffrage parliamentary democracy has this grave, persistent fault: that it tries its best, most faithful and most loyal servants too far; and as a corollary, it rewards the facile, glittering and grasping exhibitionist and spurns the man who has sought, steadfastly and selflessly, simply to do his duty.

Parliament, the Press and the public at large in Britain had no idea, then or subsequently, of the ordeal to which the last of those who had held watch and ward in India were compelled to submit. It was expedient that the careers of these men should be terminated: was it necessary that their hearts should be broken, that they should have to stand, powerless, watching the destruction—or what at the time seemed to be the destruction—of all that they and their forebears had striven to build?

In India that sense of greatness which Nehru in his apocalyptic moment apprehended in little men, swiftly vanished, and they were back in their shabby garment of littleness—shabby and drenched with blood.

In the contested area of the Punjab, the effort to prevent the spilling of innocent blood was bold, resolute and tragically unavailing. It is only this aspect of the holocaust that followed Partition which is any concern of this narrative. Elsewhere throughout the sub-continent no vestige of British authority remained after midnight on August 14-15. But since between that date and midnight on September 1-2 the Punjab Boundary Force was under the control of, and responsible to, the Supreme Commander and, through him, the Joint Defence Council, and since there were vigorous efforts at the time to minimize the extent of the social and administrative breakdown in the Punjab, and to shift the blame, the true story must be told.

The warnings of the Governor of the Punjab, Sir Evan Jenkins, had been reiterated with increasing vehemence throughout the summer. Since it was not known when precisely, and in what form, Sir Cyril Radcliffe would announce his Boundary Award, it was decided in July to bring the Punjab Boundary Force into operation on August 1, working directly under Auchinleck's orders.

Rees's force was built up on a nucleus of 4th Indian Division (which had been engaged on internal duties in the area) and was increased to a strength of five infantry brigades plus local troops, forming in units and formations the equivalent of about two divisions. Many of these units, however, had strengths far below their proper establishment, because the processes of demobilization and reconstitution were already well advanced.

The Force itself was, for the time being, kept out of the reconstitution schemes, and its troops were consequently communally mixed, Muslims and non-Muslims, as in the Army of happier days. Rees had, at the outset, two advisers, a Muslim of the Pakistan Army, Brigadier Ayub Khan,<sup>1</sup> and a Sikh of the Union of India's Army, Brigadier Brar. Later, two more advisers were added, Brigadier Nasir Ahmed and Brigadier Thimayya.<sup>2</sup>

The Punjab Boundary Force's area of operations was about 37,500 square miles—rather bigger than Ireland—and was divided into twelve civil districts. It contained a population of some fourteen and a half millions, tough, pugnacious and, even in normal times, given to a fairly high rate of violent crime. They were communally much mixed, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, in the approximate proportion of 55-25-20. Though largely agricultural in character, the area contained the two sizeable cities of Lahore and Amritsar. Through it ran both the Grand Trunk Road and the main railway line from central and eastern India to the North-West Frontier.

<sup>1</sup> Later C.-in-C. of the Army of Pakistan, and then President of Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> Later C.-in-C. of the Army of India.

The British occupation and pacification of the Punjab had finally established British ascendancy there; with its affairs wisely administered it had long been regarded as India's 'model Province'. With the relaxation of authority, however, the old feuds and hatreds, long smouldering, roared into flame again. When the Punjab Boundary Force took up its duties on 1 August 1947 the situation had already deteriorated gravely.

A strong Provincial administration, working at a high peak of efficiency, would have been hard put to it to curb the communal ferocity which was piling up throughout the whole area. But it had already been seriously weakened. A weary handful of British officials, their days in India numbered, while they themselves, individually and as a society, were subjected to unprecedented vilification, strove to maintain the old standards. Among their subordinates—already beginning to think of themselves as Pakistanis or Indians—there was a loosening of many of the ties of loyalty, discipline and responsibility.

The breakdown of the police was particularly disastrous. Seventy to eighty per cent of them were Muslims; by the order of non-Muslim officials they were disarmed. Muslim policemen in East Punjab refused to continue to serve there; non-Muslim policemen in the West all wished to go to the East. By the beginning of August, for example, in one district alone—Jullundur in East Punjab—there was a deficiency of 7,000 policemen. The civil intelligence service, on which in circumstances such as faced the Boundary Force it was essential to rely, had rapidly disintegrated.

All hot weather seasons in northern India are arduous; that of 1947 was exceptionally trying. It was a factor not to be ignored. During May, June and July there were recurrent waves of mob violence, increasing in tempo and brutality. In Amritsar and Lahore in particular there were more and more killings, and more and more property was burned and looted.

Rees was under no illusions when he took over his new job. In his own words:

Communal bitterness was at a peak, and the masses were egged on and inflamed by shock-groups of resolute and well-armed men determined to fight.<sup>1</sup>

He and his officers and men, British and Indian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, were engaged from the outset in trying to put down a large-scale, continuous and relentless civil war.

<sup>1</sup> A report (hitherto unpublished) on the Punjab Boundary Force, submitted on 15 November 1947 to the Supreme Commander in Delhi (the Rees Report).

Troops were not only constantly on the move and in action against individuals and gangs of both communities, but there were many cases of the latter fighting back hard at the troops. . . . The lawbreakers used bombs, mortars, rifles, tommy-guns and occasionally machine-guns.<sup>1</sup>

The Sikh gangs—known as *Jathas*—were particularly well organized, with armed horsemen acting as their scouts and reconnaissance units in the countryside.

In the key Sikh area, the Manjha, which lies south of Lahore and Amritsar, ferocity reached its first peak, with between 140 and 170 a day reported killed on both sides. In Amritsar there was usually a daily total of about two hundred serious casualties. The part played in this conflict by the political leaders was sinister and equivocal. In early August Mountbatten was urged by Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan to put Master Tara Singh and his chief colleagues under arrest; Vallabhbhai Patel strongly opposed this suggestion.

On August 11, in a day of particularly heavy fighting in Amritsar, with plenty of atrocities against civilians, the Punjab Boundary Force accounted for some forty-one gangsters. Master Tara Singh protested, and pointed to the far smaller number of casualties sustained by the Force. He was reminded rather briskly of the different status of the combatants, and of the folly of tackling determined, well-armed and disciplined troops.

The gangs therefore began to concentrate their attention on those who could not hit back, and resorted to the murder of unarmed citizens, to rape, abduction and arson.

Throughout, the killing was pre-medieval in its ferocity. Neither age nor sex was spared; mothers with babies in their arms were cut down, speared or shot, and Sikhs cried 'Rawalpindi' as they struck home. Both sides were equally merciless.<sup>2</sup>

In the last days before the transfer of power Sir Cyril Radcliffe was in Delhi working out the final details of his Boundary Award; Sir Evan Jenkins was trying to hold together (with Rees's staunch support) the last remnants of government in his shattered satrapy; and the appointed Governors of the succession Provinces of West Punjab (Sir Francis Mudie, until recently Governor of Sind) and East Punjab (Sir C. R. Trivedi) were waiting to take up their posts.

On August 12 there was continual bombing and firing in Amritsar, Lahore City was ablaze, and there were three mob attacks by

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Muslims on trains carrying non-Muslim refugees, with heavy casualties among these helpless, unarmed people.

On August 14 in Lahore Station—a vast, echoing, Victorian pile, not unlike the stations at Newcastle and Carlisle—thirty-five Sikhs were stabbed to death. A British lieutenant-colonel (not an officer of the Boundary Force but on the staff in Delhi) who was waiting on the platform for an eastbound train saw a small Sikh boy, of eleven or thereabouts, being pursued by a Muslim policeman. The child, shrieking 'Sahib! Sahib!' was hacked down at his feet.

The Supreme Commander flew to Lahore on August 14. As he looked down on the great plain of the Punjabs he saw smoke rising from every village, to the limits of that vast horizon, and along the dusty roads the endless streams of refugees trudging east and west. He said a decade later: 'A terrible and never-to-be-forgotten sight.'

When he reached Lahore, Jenkins and Rees met him. Jenkins told him that there were wholesale desertions of the police, that about ten per cent of the houses in the city were already destroyed, and that an even larger area had been laid waste. They discussed the possible imposition of martial law. On the civil side there were simply not enough officials left to attempt it; on the military side it would require two hundred extra officers of suitable seniority and experience. Where in all that ruin and desolation were they to be found? Rees, always ready to accept small mercies, said that he could do with just a few more officers for staff and liaison work. Appeals for military protection were multiplying. The whole refugee problem was rapidly assuming the proportions of a major eruption, to cope with which the civil administration had no more resources: would the Army please take over? Where could the Army find the officers—or the men? How long would the loyalty and discipline of the troops stand the strain? Auchinleck told Rees to keep the military escorts supplied to refugees communally mixed; and he stressed the importance of preventing disaffection from being spread among the troops by ex-members of the 'I.N.A.' or present members of the militant Muslim League 'National Guard'.

When this strange, strained conference was held on the airfield at Lahore, the British Raj had less than twelve hours to go. Those who took part in it had no other thought than to save the people of India from the consequences of their political leaders' folly and haste. They had, two soldiers and one civilian, devoted their lives to the service of India. It is no comfortable experience to be a Field-Marshal, a Governor and a Major-General, all three habituated to taking decisions and giving orders, in a bleak hour endowed with the responsibility of maintaining the fabric of society, and by every wile



and trick of your political masters deprived of the slightest chance of fulfilling that responsibility. These three men were as morally disarmed and helpless as every doomed trainload of refugees whom they tried to protect was physically disarmed and helpless.

Many years later the Congress leader, Maulana Azad, wrote:

When . . . the blood of innocent men and women flowed on both sides of the frontier, the Army remained passive spectators. . . . Lord Mountbatten said to me more in sorrow than in anger that Indian members of the Army wanted to take part in killing Muslims in East Punjab but the British officers restrained them with great difficulty. This was Lord Mountbatten's report and I am not quite sure how far this statement about the British officers was correct.<sup>1</sup>

What *was* correct was that again and again British officers saved the lives of Indians at the risk of their own; and their reward was an incredulous sneer.

On August 15 the day of liberation was strangely celebrated in the Punjab. During the afternoon a Sikh mob paraded a number of Muslim women naked through the streets of Amritsar, raped them and then hacked some of them to pieces with *kirpans*<sup>2</sup> and burned the others alive.

Rees himself was in Amritsar, trying to find Master Tara Singh. He and the Superintendent of Police—himself a Sikh—reached the scene of this horror just too late to save any of the victims. When Rees met Tara Singh he told him, in curt, frank terms, what he had just seen. The Sikh leader professed himself horrified.

The same night in Lahore a Muslim mob set fire to a Sikh *gurdwara*;<sup>3</sup> nobody knows how many were killed in this attack, since in the rubble and ashes next morning it was impossible to count the corpses.

Rees assembled his battalion commanders and subedar-majors for a conference at Lahore on August 16. He said to them:

The Punjab Boundary Force is the one rock standing firm in all this turmoil. You are the last representatives of the old Indian Army, and you are performing a task of great service to your countries in minimizing carnage and maintaining stability. I want

<sup>1</sup> *India Wins Freedom* by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> A knife, of traditional pattern, which all Sikhs were permitted by law to carry.

<sup>3</sup> A Sikh centre of worship, containing the *Granth*, or sacred books.

you to understand, and I want you to impress it on all ranks, that their duty lies in an honest, military endeavour to act at all times in an impartial and balanced way and in striving to uphold law and order, however terrible the circumstances in which you find yourselves. If you sincerely try to do this, you can be sure of my complete support.

On August 17 there was an urgent high-level meeting of political leaders and other personages at Ambala: Nehru and Liaquat (the Prime Ministers of the two new Dominions), their Defence Ministers, and the Governors of East and West Punjab. Rees attended, and Auchinleck was represented by Arthur Smith, until three days before his C.G.S., who now bore the title of Deputy Supreme Commander. The politicians were suddenly faced with some of the consequences of their actions and their speeches; they also had to contemplate the possibility of the fire spreading over the rest of the sub-continent.

Arthur Smith's calmness and courtesy and Rees's fiery Celtic sincerity preserved this huddle of frightened men from any open expression of the bitterness, hatred and confusion which seethed in their breasts.<sup>1</sup> The first attempt, at this level, to break up the Punjab Boundary Force was, for the time being, defeated.

*General Rees to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

*17 August 1947*

It is good, and encouraging to all P.B.F. officers and men, and to me personally, to know that we have your confidence and your backing. I will do all that lies in my power to see that we carry out our task as you would wish us to.

The C.G.S. will have given you an account of today's Ambala meeting. He was superb and handled the Army case magnificently! The hard truth is that without the neutral Indian Army (the P.B.F.) the slaughter and terror would have been desperate and completely out of control; and it would almost certainly develop that way if any attempt were made to withdraw us before things have a chance of settling down and both Governments get into the saddle. At present, too, we are the only people who provide a good link between the two Provincial Governments; and the refugee problem would never even take shape satisfactorily without our good offices.

We are having heavy communal propaganda levelled at our officers and men as well as against us as soldiers, but I am combating it through Indian commissioned officers, subedar-majors

<sup>1</sup> The Indian hagiologists give a different and entirely mythical account of this meeting.

and V.C.O.s. And they and the men realize and agree that unlimited bloodshed and terror would have been reigning in the central Punjab today if they were not standing firm and rock-like as the united I.A. always has, when called on. . . .

Again, thank you for your encouragement. You can rely on us to do our damndest.

But for all Rees's gallantry and energy, tact and devotion to duty, and for all the worth of the work which the Punjab Boundary Force did, it was only to have a brief—though arduous—life. It had been put to tasks for which it had never been constituted, and it had tackled them in a manner which deserved the highest possible praise. But the strain on men's loyalty and morale was becoming too great. On August 25 Rees was summoned to Delhi, and gave the Joint Defence Council a first-hand account of what was happening. He pointed out frankly that although there had not yet been actual conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim troops, the atmosphere within his Force had become very explosive, and any small incident might provoke fighting. He refrained from adding that his British officers were so overworked, and had been without rest or sleep for so long, that several of them were on the verge of a complete physical breakdown. The mood of the meeting, though alarmed, was far from appreciative of what the Force had done.

Auchinleck looked bleakly round the table and reminded the assembled dignitaries that he had set up the Punjab Boundary Force at the request of the Partition Council and that, from his point of view, the sooner responsibility was handed over to the two Dominions the better.

Meanwhile, the Delhi Press was whipping up a campaign of virulent attack on the Punjab Boundary Force and on Rees by name. On the morning of August 27 Auchinleck protested formally to Mountbatten. The Governor-General consulted V. P. Menon and Alan Campbell-Johnson:

V.P. said there was a growing feeling on both sides that the new Governments should have a more direct military control over their respective areas. Mountbatten agreed that although the Boundary Force was undoubtedly the best military answer to the problem, he was ready to concede that in this instance psychological reasons might outweigh purely military ones. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Mountbatten himself had a very real understanding of the danger

<sup>1</sup> *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p. 174.

and the tragedy of the situation. His wife was not in Delhi but in the troubled areas. During August 26 she was at Jullundur and Amritsar—the latter a city of the dead—visiting hospitals and refugee centres; all day she was face to face with horror, and late at night she had an interview with Master Tara Singh, who was at last ‘beginning to tremble at the wrath he had so readily invoked’. On the following day she was at Lahore and Rawalpindi on the same humane errands. It seemed to her, as she told her husband and his staff, that the refugees were in a state of mass hysteria, that at the official level neither side had any trust in the intentions, assurances or actions of the other Dominion, and that there was a complete lack of confidence in the Punjab Boundary Force.

Though it was necessary to protect the Force Commander from slander, in face of this irrational attitude it would have been improper to keep the Force in being any longer. Auchinleck followed up his urgent protest about the newspaper attacks with a reasoned statement of the case for dissolving the Force.

*Admiral Mountbatten to Field-Marshal Auchinleck* 27 August 1947

Thank you for your handwritten letter this morning and your typewritten letter this afternoon.

I had already got hold of the Prime Minister and when I saw him I found him entirely sympathetic; and he authorized me to send for Devadas Gandhi and Sahni, representing the *Hindustan Times* and *Indian News Chronicle*, and to put the views of the Government before them, which were briefly (a) that the Government do not wish officers to be attacked in the Press and (b) they do not wish to have attacks made on the British officers who have volunteered to remain.

We had a long interview with the two editors, who proved to be quite reasonable. I asked my Press Attaché, Campbell-Johnson, who was present, to seek an interview with you to report the details of the meeting.

I had a discussion with Baldev Singh yesterday at which he again put forward a scheme for separation of the Boundary Force. I advised him to have a word with his own Chiefs of Staff Committee and work out a scheme.

Both Nehru and Chundrigar<sup>1</sup> are anxious for a separation, and I was therefore much relieved to see that you share this view, and am grateful to you for sending me the paper which I think we might consider at the Joint Defence Council meeting tomorrow in Delhi

<sup>1</sup> Finance Minister in the Government of Pakistan, at that time staying in Delhi at the house of the High Commissioner for Pakistan.

and again the day after with the full Pakistan representation at Ambala.

I am sure you are working along the right lines for a solution.

On Friday, August 29, the Joint Defence Committee met at Lahore instead of Ambala. The two Governors-General, Mountbatten and Jinnah, both attended.

After long discussion the decision was taken to disband the Boundary Force. Pete Rees received very few thanks from either side for his efforts to carry out a task of unparalleled difficulty. Without the whole-hearted backing of the Governments and Press on both sides, the position of the Boundary Force and its Commander became rapidly untenable, and otherwise steady and experienced troops began to feel the tug of communal loyalties deeper even than their military discipline.<sup>1</sup>

However disparaging and ungrateful a view of its work the politicians might take, Pete Rees kept the Boundary Force in action until the last possible moment. His account of the activities of September 1 reads as follows:

There was fighting in most areas and reported casualties were about 600. The day's reports show the refugee traffic as continuing and increasing, and again the reports on administration for refugees were bad.

In the Sialkot, Amritsar and Gurdaspur rural areas, the P.B.F. were protecting and ferrying refugees of both communities across the flooded Ravi river. Well to the south of the river, Sikhs put in two severe attacks, in one of which Muslim refugees suffered 400 casualties, and troops eventually drove off the attackers, inflicting fifty casualties on them in each case.

To the south, in the Sulej area also, there were refugees stranded on mudbanks in the swollen river, and also attacks on refugees. In one affray, the casualties were eleven Sikhs and twenty-eight Muslims; in another, as often happened, the attackers dispersed on the arrival of an aircraft. Troops were in action in many places here, and also against Muslim armed mobs in West Punjab. There was looting and arson by Muslims in the Sialkot district, where trains were held up, and forcible conversions to Islam were reported from Gujranwala.<sup>2</sup>

The Force was dissolved on the night of September 1-2 and Rees,

<sup>1</sup> *Mission With Mountbatten* by Alan Campbell-Johnson, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> The Rees Report.

## LATEST OF MANY SERVICES

for whom Mountbatten had a high regard (he had told Devadas Gandhi and Sahni on August 27 that Rees was perhaps his ablest divisional commander in Burma), was ordered to Delhi. The situation in the capital was rapidly deteriorating and it seemed likely that it might become another Amritsar or Lahore. Mountbatten appointed Rees commander of a special operations staff, at his own disposal, to deal with this new threat.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to General Rees* 13 September 1947

Now that the Punjab Boundary Force has broken up . . . I want to tell you how greatly I appreciate your excellent work while in command of it.

As you know, the Force was formed by me to meet the wishes of the leaders of India and the leaders of Pakistan before partition took place. The sole object of the Force was to provide an instrument representative of both Pakistan and India and of as neutral a composition as possible, so that if there were trouble over the award of the Boundary Commission it could help the constituted civil authorities to maintain law and order in the civil districts adjoining the boundary.

I am quite sure that the Force, with you as its Commander, would have been quite adequate for this purpose. But, as you know, the situation with which it was in fact faced was a completely different one. The massacres, arson and disorder which started in Amritsar before the Boundary Commission had made its award had nothing to do with the boundary or anything connected with it. The whole movement was undoubtedly planned long beforehand and soon gave rise to inevitable repercussions in the West Punjab. So that you and your troops were faced with a problem quite different from that which you had been asked to solve and far beyond your capacity. The complete breakdown of civil administration on both sides of the border and the total failure of the police on both sides of the border to carry out even their most ordinary duties, placed a burden on you and the troops which, as I have said, was quite beyond their powers. However, I need say no more except that the way in which you and your officers and men tackled this unprecedented and terribly difficult task was beyond all praise. You have deserved well of India and I hope that some day this country will acknowledge its debt to the Punjab Boundary Force.

I thank you and your men most sincerely for all that you did in the interests of humanity and security.

\* \* \*

With the dissolution of the Punjab Frontier Force Auchinleck's final operational responsibility in the sub-continent came to an end. The last remnant of the old Indian Army was no more. His only remaining tasks therefore were administrative: to supervise and control the emergence—so far as concerned the transfer of individuals, equipment, ammunition, stores and installations—of the two new Dominion Armies; and to arrange the safe and orderly withdrawal of units and personnel of the British forces that were in India when the Raj ended.

The second of these tasks, though it had its moments of difficulty and danger and was carried out in an atmosphere of perpetual pinpricks and nagging, he and his staff were permitted to accomplish at speed and with a fair degree of smoothness. In his performance of the first, however, he was continually subjected by the political leaders of India to deceitful and underhand interference which amounted, in the end, to complete sabotage.

As soon as British authority was withdrawn they disregarded solemn obligations which they had freely incurred and, reckless of the true interests of their country, sought only to consolidate and extend the power which they had obtained. Even the fundamental responsibilities of government—to bring the civil war, slaughter and destruction to an end, and restore law and order—they regarded as of secondary importance. What mattered to them, above all else, was to cripple and thwart the establishment of Pakistan as a viable, independent nation; and since the Joint Defence Council and the Supreme Commander's Headquarters were, in their view, the main obstacles on their road to the fulfilment of this aim, these must be swiftly and systematically undermined.

Their attack opened at once and, in public and private, was sustained with the utmost venom. Yet utterly unscrupulous as they were—both in the impediments they put in the way of the work of the Supreme Commander and his officers, and in the insolent and lying accusations they levelled at him—they must, in the last resort and paradoxical as it may seem, be acquitted of malice. They had for years despised and distrusted the Indian Army; and they had spent their lives blaming their British rulers for every malady that afflicted India. They did not discard these habits when they kissed hands as newly-appointed Ministers in the Government of a free and sovereign member-State of the British Commonwealth.

The position of Lord Mountbatten in respect of this campaign against Auchinleck was singularly unfortunate, and as it gathered momentum he was not altogether free from blame. The original proposal that, after August 15, he, the last Viceroy, should remain

as Governor-General of both Dominions had been sensible: in his own person, though in no sense as a representative of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, he would have retained an impartial status and authority. But long before Partition he had lost the trust of Jinnah and the Muslim League. When Jinnah refused to accept him as Governor-General of Pakistan and took the post himself, Mountbatten's position was untenable. As Governor-General of India alone he could no longer exert any truly impartial influence. He became at once a constitutional monarch, and not an international—or rather, supranational—arbiter.

Auchinleck, however, did retain his supranational status after August 15—but solely in an executive and administrative role. If the Joint Defence Council and the Partition Council failed to support him, because their members were at loggerheads, he could—in theory—appeal to the British Government. But the British Government were uninterested, ignorant and alarmed. Having conceded power they had no desire to appear—even by giving their faithful servant the support he had a right to ask—to be trying to hold on to any remnant of it. Their role was that of the helpless and not particularly sympathetic bystander.

The pattern of a man's life is easier to describe than to analyse. Auchinleck was now, as throughout his whole career, unaffected by any considerations of his own interest, prestige or position. He was doing his job, however sad or distasteful he found it. Since Mountbatten and Nehru had, at the end of August, put a curb on newspaper attacks on British officers by name, Auchinleck was quite unaware of the bitter feeling which was being fostered against him, in secret and in high places. His situation had therefore a nightmare similarity to that in which he had stood, five years before, as Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces. Then he had won a decisive battle while his authority was sapped behind his back and his name blackened. Now he was striving fairly and justly to re-fashion two new Armies out of one which the politicians had destroyed. The degree of his concentration on this task was demonstrated in the following letter:

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to General Scoones*<sup>1</sup> 19 September 1947

... Things have happened here and in the Punjab which would have been unbelievable a few weeks ago. The refugee problem is really colossal and to find a solution for it seems almost impossible. In short, the idea that the coming of partition and the grant of

<sup>1</sup> Scoones was now Principal Staff Officer in the Commonwealth Relations Office.



Dominion autonomy would cause communal feeling to die down has proved entirely false. Communal feeling today, from the highest to the lowest, is, in my opinion, as bitter as it possibly could be and any idea of real co-operation between the two Dominions on any subject is almost unthinkable at present. One can only hope that reason will prevail and that matters will now begin to improve in this respect. But there is no sign of it at present.

Our position as a neutral body trying to partition the Armed Forces to the equal advantage of both Dominions is not, as you will realize, exactly an easy one. However, we are getting on with the job and we have done a tremendous amount since the Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee began to function. Quite frankly, I would not have believed it possible for any H.Q. staff to get through the amount of work that this staff has done here, especially in view of the difficulties and obstacles, some of them deliberately manufactured, with which they have had to contend. I think any fair-minded person would acknowledge that the work has been well done and that an incredible amount has been accomplished in a very short space of time, so far without any real breakdown of discipline, morale or administration. There is no doubt now, I fear, that the Army has become infected with the communal virus, and it has become so hot in those establishments like schools of instruction which are still joint, that we are taking steps to separate Pakistan trainees in such schools from the Indian trainees, even although this means disintegration of training for the former. Our original idea was to keep these schools and establishments joint until such time as they could be duplicated in the other Dominion; this has now, I am afraid, gone the way of many other dreams.

We expect not more than about 3,000 British officers out of a rough total of 9,000 to volunteer to remain on during Reconstitution. With the Army at its present size, over 400,000 men, there are not enough officers, even counting the British officers, to go round. As you know, moreover, the quality of such officers as there are is nothing like high enough to enable us to find sufficient officers of the requisite experience and knowledge to fill the high command and staff appointments. This has been pointed out many times to both Governments and is still being pointed out by me at frequent intervals. I do not think, however, that facts such as this make much impression on people who are determined to nationalize the officer cadres as quickly as possible, which appears to be the case so far as the Indian Government is concerned. In

Pakistan the authorities seem to be much more reasonable and they are refusing to listen to the clamour of certain interested Dominion officers that nationalization should be speeded up regardless of efficiency. In fact they have taken the line that they do not intend to promote Dominion officers too soon or too quickly and they have given Frank Messervy a very free hand in this matter. I think myself they are very wise in the course they are pursuing but whether they will be able to resist the pressure of interested people for very long I do not know. I do think, however, that they are certain to ask for the services of quite a number of British officers even after Reconstitution has been completed. I do not myself think that India will ask for the services of many British officers after this date, if she asks for any at all. Personally I doubt if she will ask for any except possibly for a few technicians, who will probably be asked to adopt Dominion nationality. . . .

\* \* \*

The Supreme Commander was not to be allowed to complete his mission.

*Admiral Mountbatten to Field-Marshal Auchinleck 26 September 1947*

This is probably the most difficult letter that I have ever had to write in my life. . . .

As you know, I have always held the view that it was absolutely essential in the interests both of India and of England that you should remain at the military helm, not only until the transfer of power, but also until the reconstitution of the Armed Forces had been substantially completed. You have proved a tower of strength: and I do not know what I should have done without you. I have, as you know, always tried to fight your battles with the greatest vigour against all criticism, from whichever quarter it may have come.

I admit that I was anxious as to what your position would be after the transfer of power: but when the Joint Defence Council accepted my proposal to make you Supreme Commander in charge of a Supreme Headquarters, I hoped that we had succeeded in devising an arrangement which would satisfy the desire of both the new Dominions to have forces under their own operational control, with effect from August 15, and which, at the same time, would ensure central administrative control over all the forces in the sub-continent of India during the process of reconstitution. I had hoped, in particular, that your own position

was safeguarded by the fact that you were not to have any operational control, and that, even in the administrative field, you would be carrying out the directions of the Joint Defence Council.

Alas, my hopes were very soon shaken. Scarcely had the new set-up come into force, when a volume of criticism started, not only in the papers (which I managed to get stopped) but in the Cabinet itself. I am sure you have been aware of this criticism but I doubt whether you realize its extent or its persistency. The complaint of the Indian leaders is that the previous Commander-in-Chief in India and his subordinate Commanders-in-Chief have merely been converted into a Supreme Commander, with three very senior Deputy Supreme Commanders and a Supreme Headquarters containing senior staff officers; which towers over their own Navy, Army and Air Force commanders. They say that this is a derogation of their sovereignty and is impeding the autonomous development of their Armed Forces, and so on and so forth.

I am well aware that you did not ask for the title of Supreme Commander, and I plead guilty to having selected it: but I was anxious that your status after August 15 should be in no way diminished.

It is not, however, only the title to which exception is taken. There is no doubt in my mind that Indian Ministers resent the fact that at the head of the Supreme Headquarters there should be a man of your very high rank and great personal prestige and reputation—so immeasurably superior in these respects to their own Commander-in-Chief. I should be a poor friend if I did not admit that this resentment, which was initially directed against your position, has inevitably turned against yourself. One of the most balanced and level-headed Ministers complained recently that you seemed to regard yourself as the champion of Pakistan's interests; such is the reward of strict impartiality! It is only fair to add that Pandit Nehru himself has no personal bias in this matter and sympathizes with the difficulties of your position.

I have argued the case with the Indian leaders at great length. I have pointed out that you have no operational command over the Armed Forces of either Dominion, and that Lockhart, Elmhirst and Hall<sup>1</sup> are responsible solely to the Indian Cabinet. I have explained that everything that you do in the administrative field is subject to the approval of the Joint Defence Council. I have emphasized that you are responsible to His Majesty's Government

<sup>1</sup> Air Vice-Marshal (later Air Marshal) Sir Thomas Elmhirst, C.-in-C. Indian Air Force; Captain (later Rear-Admiral) J. T. S. Hall, Flag Officer Commanding Indian Navy.

for all the British officers now serving in India, as well as for the British troops who are awaiting withdrawal. I have reminded them of your unparalleled services to India and to the Indian Army, and of the deep personal regard which they entertained for you in the past.

I am sorry to say that I have completely failed to convince them . . . and the point has now been reached when I can no longer prevent them from putting up an official proposal to the Joint Defence Council that the Supreme Headquarters should be abolished and replaced by an organization with a less high-sounding title and headed by less high-ranking officers.

The discussion of a proposal of this kind in the Joint Defence Council would be absolutely deplorable. It is possible that the Pakistan representatives would oppose the proposal out of cussedness, but not, I fear, out of any sincere desire to support you. It is only a short while ago that they were pressing for your removal on the grounds of your alleged anti-Moslem sentiments during the Gurgaon disturbances. But whatever line Pakistan might take, I myself would find it a most difficult case to argue.

There is of course the point of your special *personal* responsibility to His Majesty's Government for British officers in India: but it seems to me that, now that the Joint Defence Council have approved your paper suggesting that all who wish to stay on should enter into new contracts with the two Dominion Governments, your personal responsibilities will have been substantially discharged. In any case I myself would find it very difficult to argue that a Supreme Commander, with the rank of Field-Marshal, and three Deputy Supreme Commanders with the rank of Air Marshal or its equivalent, are essential to look after their interests. We all know how much they look to you personally but it would be a terrible reflection on other senior officers if none could be found to take your place.

But, above all, my dear Claude, I should simply hate to contemplate a discussion in which your great name became the subject of bitter controversy, and in the course of which imputations might be made which, though palpably unjustified, could not but cast a slur on your reputation and prestige. This must be avoided at almost any cost and I can see only one way out of the dilemma.

You have often and often told me with characteristic unselfishness that you would willingly and indeed gladly fade out of the picture if I were at any time to tell you that this would help me personally or the general situation in this country. Bitter though

it is for me to say so, I sincerely believe that the moment has arrived for me to take advantage of your selfless offer: and my suggestion is that you should yourself write a letter to me as Chairman of the Joint Defence Council proposing the winding up of Supreme Headquarters as soon as the major units have been transferred to their respective Dominions and its replacement by an organization with a less high-sounding title and headed by much less high-ranking officers. . . .

Having seen this coming for some time—although hoping against hope that I could get the clamour to die down—I took the opportunity of Listowel's presence out here to discuss the matter with him. I do not need to assure you that I repeated to him what I told the Cabinet in London, namely that I regarded you as the greatest Commander-in-Chief that India has ever had. I explained the volume of criticism that was now being so unjustly directed against you, and I emphasized your special responsibilities to His Majesty's Government for all British officers in India and for the British troops still in this country. I concluded by warning him that the position might even be reached when the feeling of nationalism and the desire to be complete masters of their own house would reach a point at which it was impossible for any living Englishman to retain the title of Supreme Commander.

Having now no secret channels of communication to the Prime Minister and in view of the frightful difficulty of explaining a complicated story like this in a telegram I asked Listowel to explain the position that might arise to Attlee, and through him to the Chiefs of Staff, and to obtain his contingent approval to my acting at my discretion if I felt the time had come. The Prime Minister's approval has now arrived. In other words, His Majesty's Government have given their approval to any arrangement that I may think advisable.

I have felt so guilty in our recent talks at being unable to put the case fairly and squarely before you: but I was so terribly anxious to keep you by my side, that I hoped against hope that things would blow over.

I have been keeping back from you till now a matter which I have only recently received the Prime Minister's decision to disclose to you.

In the final Indian Honours List which I was instructed to send in on the eve of the transfer of power on August 14, I need hardly tell you that your name appears in a class by itself at the top of the list. I asked the Prime Minister to recommend your

name to the King for a peerage, and I am immeasurably gratified and thrilled to be able to inform you that the Prime Minister wishes me to obtain your consent to putting your name forward to His Majesty for a barony.

I know you are not the sort of person who would wish to seek an honour of this sort for yourself, but please bear in mind that this honour will have its effect on all those British officers who have looked to you so long. It will make them feel that there is no question of your being pushed out, but that the re-arrangement of the Headquarters was a natural event, and that your sterling services have been recognized by the King.

My original intention was that your peerage, if you decided to accept it, would appear in the next New Year's Honours List, since, at the time of recommending it, I imagined that you would be at your post until the spring of next year. If that, alas, is not to be the case, I should like to see your peerage announced by itself, simultaneously with the announcement of your resignation: and I much hope that you will allow me to send an immediate telegram to the Prime Minister to this effect.

P.S. 'Pug' has tendered me advice to release him within the next month or so for he too feels that as an 'impartial' official he will soon be subject to similar criticism.

*General Lord Ismay to Field-Marshal Auchinleck 26 September 1947*

Dickie has shown me his letter to you. At first I was very unhappy; but, on further reflection of all the forces at work in this sorry situation, and of all the unpleasant possibilities that face us, I have come to the conclusion that Dickie's proposal is the happiest solution of an absolute impasse. . . .

I feel as strongly as I have ever felt anything in my life that you in a big way, and I in a much smaller way, are now in a completely impossible position, by reason of our lack of power. I simply could not bear the thought of the possibility that mud should be cast on you in the last months of an Indian career which has been longer than that of any previous C.-in-C.—not excluding Bobs of Kandahar—and certainly not less glorious than any of them.

I have seen the *possibility* coming for some time—as indeed I know that you have from various things you have let drop. And it has frequently been on the tip of my tongue to raise it. But somehow or another I thought that you would do so—if you so wished: and I refrained.

I only hope to God that on this—as on many fundamental

things—your feelings will be the same as mine: and I long to come and have a yarn with you as soon as ever you wish.

As to the peerage, I doubt whether this will give you much of a thrill. But I beg you to accept it, as it will give so much real pleasure to your legion of friends, and to the wonderful Army that you created—but which has now alas been disrupted.

One day we will spend an hour or so on the cross benches, but it will be many years before I make my maiden speech. How about you?

My thoughts are much with you, old friend, and I want to see you.

Auchinleck decided not to accept the peerage.

In a report written on September 28, and sent to London by safe hand, he set out for the eyes of the Prime Minister, the Chief of the Naval Staff, the C.I.G.S. and the Chief of the Air Staff only, his considered opinion of the situation as a whole, six weeks after the transfer of power. It was at once a warning and an indictment, of the sternest and most unequivocal nature:

... 3. There is no doubt that, today, the communal feeling and tension between the two Dominions of India and Pakistan is so great that there is a real risk of their becoming involved in open war with each other at short notice. I sincerely hope this will not occur. . . .

In such circumstances, I can see no alternative but to withdraw all British officers and other ranks from the Dominion Armed Forces and to concentrate them and their families under the protection of such British troops as remain in the country until they can be evacuated. British civilians are no longer my responsibility but there is little doubt in my mind that we should also have to arrange for their protection in the last resort.

As you are aware, there are very few British troops now left in the sub-continent, and the few that remain are being steadily reduced month by month. There is no apparent remedy for this state of affairs and we should have to do the best we could with what we have. I fear that it will be physically impossible to provide protection by British troops for anything approaching the total number of Europeans still in the two Dominions.

4. I have no hesitation whatever in affirming that the present India Cabinet are implacably determined to do all in their power to prevent the establishment of the Dominion of Pakistan on a firm basis. In this I am supported by the unanimous opinion of my senior officers, and indeed by all responsible British officers

cognizant of the situation. No one was originally more strongly opposed to partition than myself, if only for military and strategical reasons, but since H.M.G. made their decision and I was entrusted with the task of dividing the former Indian Armed Forces between the two Dominions, and I and my officers have worked whole-heartedly and impartially to effect this. There can be no question as to the truth of this statement.

Before the transfer of power on August 15 the representatives of the new India forbore to show their hand and displayed generally a spirit of reasonableness and an apparent desire to co-operate. The meetings of the Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee were conducted in an encouraging spirit of co-operation and of give and take.

Since August 15, however, the situation has steadily deteriorated and the Indian leaders, Cabinet Ministers, civil officials and others have persistently tried to obstruct the work of partition of the Armed Forces. I and my officers have been continuously and virulently accused of being pro-Pakistan and partial, whereas the truth is that we have merely tried to do our duty impartially and without fear, favour or affection. That we have done this is universally acknowledged by all fair-minded people. This campaign continues and grows stronger and more vicious every day. The Governor-General, Lord Mountbatten, is subjected to strong and unceasing pressure to abolish my Headquarters, so that the one impartial body remaining in this country shall be removed.

So open and obvious are these attacks that there is not one of the officers of Supreme Commander's H.Q., senior or junior, who is not imbued with the greatest disgust for and dislike of the creators of this state of affairs. It is probably fair to say that few, if any of them, would wish to take service under the India Government. They, like the majority of their countrymen, can not give of their best unless they are trusted and respected for their good faith. The Governor-General has done his best to check this campaign but with little result. The authors of it are too strongly imbued with the implacable determination to remove anything which is likely to prevent their gaining their own ends, which are to prevent Pakistan receiving her just share, or indeed anything of the large stocks of reserve arms, equipment, stores, etc. held in the arsenals and depots in India. This is an open secret. This being so, it is becoming increasingly impossible for myself and my officers to continue with our task. If we are removed, there is no hope at all of any just division of assets in the shape of movable stores belonging to the former Indian Army.



The attitude of Pakistan, on the other hand, has been reasonable and co-operative throughout. This is natural in the circumstances, as Pakistan has practically nothing of her own and must obtain most of what she wants from the reserves of stores, etc. now lying in India.

5. When the decision to partition India was announced, the British officers of the Indian Armed Forces were asked to volunteer to serve on during Reconstitution under the terms agreed upon between H.M.G. and the two new Dominion Governments. Those who volunteered did so in the general desire to help in a fair and efficient division of the Armed Forces. Out of a rough total of some 8,000 officers of the Indian Army, about 2,800 have volunteered. These volunteers are now asking to be released from their contracts under the three months' notice clause in rapidly increasing numbers. One of the chief reasons for this is because they hold that they volunteered to help in Reconstitution and not to help the new Governments to keep law and order in their own territories. The conditions of massacre and bestiality of the worst kind in which many of these British officers have been working continuously for many weeks have sickened them. They have lost faith in their cloth and in their men, of whom they were so proud a short two months back.

I have recently had reports from senior and reliable officers who have been sent to study conditions in the two Punjabs. These are unanimous in recording that the morale of the British officers now serving there is lower than they have ever before experienced. They ascribe this:

- (i) To disgust at the appalling scenes they are forced to see in the execution of their duty.
- (ii) To a sense of frustration owing to the almost total lack of aid and support from the civilian authorities.
- (iii) To a conviction that the exercise of impartiality is no longer possible or indeed desired by those in authority.
- (iv) To a feeling that their efforts are entirely unrecognized by either Dominion Government. . . .

7. There is no doubt that the civil administration in the East Punjab (India) has almost completely broken down and that law and order have practically ceased to exist. In the West Punjab (Pakistan) conditions in this respect are better, but the administration is terribly weak there also. . . .

Today, there is an organized system of information and control which enables Muslim refugee trains to be attacked with impunity. A few days ago, 1,500 helpless refugees are said to have

been massacred in one such train alone at Amritsar, the escort, including the British officer in command, being killed or wounded. On the other hand, military trains carrying troops and stores in the furtherance of Reconstitution are unmolested.

Delhi is quiet now, but there is no guarantee that the killings will not start again at any moment. The country round is in a thoroughly disturbed state and no Muslim can move about freely without risk to his life.

On the other side, too, in Pakistan, there have been equally horrible occurrences, though the general impression is that these are more spontaneous and less organized than those in the East Punjab.

In the last week or so at least five British officers have been killed in carrying out their duty in attempting to protect refugees or in putting down disorder.

8. It is true that outside the two Punjabs and the United Provinces, there is no marked disorder at present, but even in these quieter areas the morale of the British officer has been affected and applications to be allowed to leave are increasing. This, in my opinion, is due to the general feeling of frustration and disappointment at the rapid and continuing deterioration in the general situation.

So far there is no evidence of any general anti-British feeling or of immediate danger to British lives and property.

In this country, however, there is a well-established precedent when in trouble for placing the blame on the British officer and I have no doubt whatever myself that, should the India Government find itself in imminent danger of collapse or of losing all prestige in the eyes of the world, a deliberate attempt will be made to create a diversion by blaming the British, not excluding the Governor-General. The same might well happen in Pakistan. The danger in such an eventuality is that the mob will interpret these efforts to impute blame in terms of assault and murder on individual British officers and civilians. Already in Delhi several British officers and women have received threatening messages because of their humane efforts to aid the Muslim refugees concentrated in thousands in large refugee camps here, in shocking conditions.

9. In the existing circumstances I have had to consider very seriously whether the time is not approaching, if it has not already arrived, for the complete withdrawal of the British officers from the Armed Forces of both Dominions and the termination of the present conditions under which they are serving. In this matter

## AUCHINLECK

I alone am responsible to the Chiefs of Staff and H.M.G. in the United Kingdom and I feel this responsibility deeply and I have no intention whatever of asking British officers to serve on in impossible and degrading conditions. Such a step would automatically mean the dissolution of the Supreme Commander's organization and the end of Reconstitution as originally planned.

... I do not now feel that this would matter much, as the obstructive tactics of the India Government have already made Reconstitution largely inoperative, now that the actual movement of major units of the Army and the division of the Navy and Air Force are practically complete.

I realize that this would be a most serious step to take but I have no hesitation in recommending that it must be taken if conditions do not improve. I am keeping the closest watch on the situation and shall report developments to you by signal.

10. In the event of open hostilities between the Armed Forces of the two Dominions, a by no means impossible contingency, it will be essential to order all British officers and other ranks serving with these Armed Forces to desist at once from any form of activity connected with their command and administration. Arrangements have been made to effect this at short notice and commanders concerned have been informed. Both Governments have been officially made aware of this position through the Joint Defence Council.

Auchinleck was now as determined to go, though in his own time, as the Indian leaders were determined to kick him out.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to General Scoones*

*5 October 1947*

I send herewith ... a copy of a note I propose to submit to the Joint Defence Council on the winding up of my Headquarters. I am sending it in the first instance in draft form to Mountbatten as Chairman of the J.D.C. to get his reactions to it. As you know, there is a violent animosity towards my Headquarters, the J.D.C. and indeed *any* form of joint activity, which may help to secure anything for Pakistan at the expense of India, in the minds of the Indian Government, and they have put every possible pressure on Mountbatten to get rid of me and my Headquarters! We are quite willing and indeed anxious to go as you will readily understand, but we can not quit leaving all the British officers out here without a head or without an organization to look after them and their families. As to the Reconstitution aspect of the situation, you will, I think, find that fully explained in my draft note. The

## LATEST OF MANY SERVICES

date recommended, December 31, has been agreed upon after the most careful and judicial consideration. . . . We are all agreed that this is the earliest date if confusion, hardship and discontent are to be avoided. We are absolutely unanimous in this and I think that, when you read the reasoning which led us to this conclusion, you will agree too. . . .

Whether the Indian leaders will oppose the date being as late as December 31 I don't know, but I shall do my best to stick to it, as I am sure it is right.

Pakistan has no desire to see us go as they know very well that in us lies their only hope of getting anything out of India. . . .

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to Admiral Mountbatten* 6 October 1947

I enclose a draft of a note which I have prepared for the J.D.C. on the subject of the premature (in relation to the original date of 1 April 1948) closing down of Supreme Commander's Headquarters.

This note has been prepared by me after the most careful consideration of all the factors involved and in the closest consultation with my three Deputies, who are in unanimous and complete agreement with its contents and with the recommendations made in it.

I personally am convinced that it would not be right or safe to close down my Headquarters earlier than December 31, though I and my principal advisers would be very willing to do so.

I am well aware, of course, of the pressure which is being put upon you by your Government to effect the removal of myself and my Headquarters. I and my advisers are well aware of the reasons for this pressure. I would, however, remind you that my Headquarters serves not only India but also Pakistan, through the medium of the Joint Defence Council, of which you are the independent Chairman. Therefore, before any action can be taken in this matter, the prior agreement of the Government of Pakistan is necessary. So far as I am aware, the Government of Pakistan has not yet been consulted as to what it considers should be the date for the closing down of my Headquarters.

In conclusion, I would remind you that there is another aspect, which is rapidly increasing in importance with the deterioration of the general situation out here, and that is my responsibility to H.M.G. in the U.K. for British officers and other ranks still in this country.

I shall be grateful for your comments on the draft note so that it may be sent without undue delay to the Secretary of the J.D.C. to be placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

## AUCHINLECK

The enclosed note was a recapitulation of the history of the Supreme Commander's Headquarters, and it ended with a series of specific recommendations:

(a) That the Supreme Commander and his Headquarters should disappear on November 30, being replaced by a Commander British Forces, India and Pakistan, who would be responsible only for the control and repatriation of the British Forces and individual British officers and other ranks and their families in India and Pakistan, excluding such officers and other ranks as might remain in the Services of the two Dominions, under terms to be arranged.

(b) That the existing Military Movement Control Directorate should remain as part of the Headquarters of the Commander British Forces in India and Pakistan until it closed down.

(c) That the Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee should be dissolved on 30 November 1947.

(d) That Headquarters British Forces in India and Pakistan should cease to exist on 31 December 1947.

(e) That as soon as possible after 31 December 1947, all British Forces and individual British officers and other ranks due for repatriation should be concentrated at Deolali and Kalyan in India, or at Karachi in Pakistan, under the control of two British commanders, who should be responsible respectively, in direct communication with H.M.G. in the United Kingdom and the Defence Ministries of India and Pakistan as the case might be, for their welfare and embarkation in accordance with a prearranged programme.

The next meeting of the Joint Defence Council was held in Lahore on October 16. It was extremely stormy. Item 17 on the agenda was Auchinleck's proposal that his Headquarters should close down on November 30.

Mountbatten was in the chair. Nehru was not present, India being represented by Baldev Singh and Gopalaswami Ayyangar, an influential member of the All-India Congress Committee who had joined the administration as Minister without Portfolio but with a special responsibility for the East Punjab. Liaquat Ali Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, opened by declaring his opposition to the proposal.

The Indians, assured that they were getting their own way, smoothly and complacently supported the proposal. What they were anxious to avoid, however, was any disclosure of the real reasons

for the decision. But in this manoeuvre Auchinleck had no intention of being an accomplice. Liaquat continued stubbornly to present the case for the retention of the Headquarters. The Indians took refuge behind the Supreme Commander's own recommendation.

He did not let them escape unscathed. He observed:

My reasons for that recommendation are stated—as mildly as possible—in the paper which is before the meeting. In the present atmosphere it has become impossible for me and my officers to carry on with our task after November 30. I am not prepared to keep my officers in this impossible situation. Continual innuendos and accusations are being levelled against my Headquarters. I and my officers cannot continue, in such circumstances, to perform a task for which co-operation is necessary. I have not made this proposal in any desire to run away from the completion of my responsibilities, but because in this situation I cannot for much longer discharge those responsibilities.

*Gopaldaswami Ayyangar*: I am very strongly in favour of accepting the recommendations in the paper. If it is intended to deal with this question on the basis of having to make out a case one way or the other, I shall found my argument on the fact that the major part of the assigned task has been done. These grounds alone are sufficient.

*Auchinleck*: Let me make myself clear. I have not completed the task which I set out to perform. And let me stress this: I have nothing to add to my paper, which represents my considered views. I have lately visited Karachi. While I was there I told Mr. Jinnah what I intend to do.

*Mountbatten*: I believe that, if these riots and massacres hadn't happened, and brought about this atmosphere of suspicion, hostility indeed, it would have been possible for the Supreme Commander's Headquarters to carry on. But, you see, whereas in Karachi there have been very few incidents, in Delhi there has been almost complete dislocation. The atmosphere in Delhi is far more highly charged than in Karachi, and it's made it very difficult for the Supreme Commander's Headquarters to function.

*Liaquat Ali Khan*: I should have been able to appreciate this if the officers of the Headquarters had been Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs. But I don't understand how the killings can have affected the British officers in the Headquarters. Anyway, surely the logical conclusion is for the Supreme Commander's Headquarters to move to Karachi.

## AUCHINLECK

*Gopalaswami Ayyangar:* That will not improve the atmosphere in Delhi.

The wrangle went on for some time more. When it veered to the division of stores and equipment, the air quivered with animosity. The Indians smoothly hinted that this was a routine question to be settled between the two Dominions themselves.

*Liaquat Ali Khan:* The division of stores is not a minor but a major matter. An army without equipment is as much use as tin soldiers.

*Baldev Singh:* I pledge myself, on behalf of my Government, to take upon myself the full responsibility of delivering to Pakistan her share of stores in accordance with the decisions of the Joint Defence Council or the Arbitral Tribunal.

*Gopalaswami Ayyangar:* I associate myself with that statement. I am sure it will be endorsed by the Government of India.<sup>1</sup>

Mountbatten, admitting that he had not expected this impasse, since Jinnah had accepted Auchinleck's statement 'so philosophically', said that he felt that the Joint Defence Council was not competent to resolve it. He propounded two alternative courses: either to accept Auchinleck's proposals, with the corollary that the Commanders-in-Chief in each Dominion would become members of the Joint Defence Council, and set up an inter-Dominion organization to complete the processes of reconstitution and division; or to keep the Supreme Commander's Headquarters in being until 1 April 1948.

'This,' he concluded, 'obviously could not be made to work without the agreement of both Governments.'

*Liaquat Ali Khan:* Once an agreement has been made between the two Governments, one of them should not break it.

The proceedings concluded formally. The Council:

... invited the Governments of India and Pakistan further to consider, in Cabinet, the future of the Supreme Commander's Headquarters, in the light of the recorded discussion at this meeting, the minutes of which would be made available to them, and

<sup>1</sup> 'The British Supreme Commander's H.Q. was closed . . . before any appreciable quantity of the material had been transferred.' *The Making of Pakistan* by Richard Symonds, p. 79.

## LATEST OF MANY SERVICES

noted that H.M. Government would have to be consulted as well.<sup>1</sup>

The two Cabinets duly considered the whole matter afresh. There was an exchange of telegrams of undisguised bitterness, with neither side conceding an inch. Auchinleck, however, had made up his mind.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to General Scoones*

21 October 1947

... this H.Q. will close down on November 30.

As you will see from my proposals, it is my intention that I should be succeeded by a Commander, British Forces in India and Pakistan, who would take over completely and discharge in exactly the same way as I have been doing my responsibilities in respect of British units in this country and British officers and other ranks serving with the Dominion Forces. This is absolutely essential and must be maintained whatever Mountbatten or the Indian Government may say.

When ... my proposals for a successor H.Q. have been agreed to by H.M.G., which is of course necessary, I propose to recommend to the C.O.S. that I should be succeeded by Arthur Smith. ...

The appointment of Arthur Smith is likely to be unpopular with the India Government because they resent his impartiality and outspokenness and they have already tried to persuade Mountbatten that he should not be appointed. As, however, he will have nothing whatever to do with reconstitution or the Armed Forces of the two Dominions except in so far as his responsibility for the welfare and fair treatment of their British officers is concerned, the matter is really no concern whatever of the Government of India or of the Government of Pakistan. As a matter of fact, I think Pakistan would welcome Arthur Smith, but as I say it is no concern of theirs. I am entirely against bowing to the wishes or prejudices of the India Government in this matter. They are the people who have made the present position impossible and they are the people who would like to get control over the British officers and other ranks who will still remain after I go. It is for H.M.G. to say who is to command the British Forces in this country and it is for me, I think, to recommend whom I consider suitable. So I shall recommend Arthur Smith, and if you agree with me ... I rely on you to support me in this.

<sup>1</sup> Minutes of the 12th Meeting of the Joint Defence Council held at Lahore on 16 October 1947.



Scoones did support him, and the British Government, after a lapse of more than a fortnight, followed the course which he had suggested. Neither Dominion pressed its objections to the point of a final breach over this issue, for they were involved now in a much more fundamental, much more lasting quarrel—Kashmir.

On this issue, powerless, rejected, vilified and under notice of dismissal as he was, Auchinleck—unexpectedly and dramatically—performed the last, and perhaps the greatest, of his services to the peoples of the sub-continent.

\* \* \*

The political and constitutional convolutions of the Kashmir dispute may be disregarded. Before Partition, Kashmir was the largest of the Princely States. Bordering Tibet, China and the Soviet Union, it occupied a strategic situation of great importance. Of its population of over four million, less than one quarter were Hindus, the rest Muslim; but the Hindu minority, headed by the Maharaja, Sir Hari Singh, was a small oligarchy, entrenched in wealth, power and privilege. Jawaharlal Nehru was a scion of this oligarchy. In the period immediately after the transfer of power, all the Princely States were being pressed, with increasing ruthlessness, to accede to one Dominion or the other. Kashmir, however, was a special case: on August 14 the Maharaja had signed a 'standstill' agreement with both India and Pakistan, thus making a compromise between his own desire, as a Hindu, to accede to India and his Muslim subjects' wish to become Pakistanis. He then procrastinated, and refused to make up his mind. Before the end of August, Ismay, on a few days' leave in Kashmir, was asked by Mountbatten 'to do his best to get the Maharaja to make up his vacillating mind' and accede to whichever Dominion he and his people might decide.

But the Maharaja would not decide. While he 'boggled and intrigued for his own profit',<sup>1</sup> others tried to force the decision. At the end of August the Muslim tribesmen in Poonch—the district of western Kashmir bordering on Pakistan—rose in rebellion and formed their own Azad (Free) Kashmir Government. On October 24 some five thousand guerilla tribesmen, mainly Pathans, crossed over from the North-West Frontier Province into Kashmir to support their kinsfolk. On Sunday, October 26 the Maharaja precipitately announced his decision: he would accede at once to India, and he asked for the immediate support of Indian troops. Jinnah, the Governor-

<sup>1</sup> *Jinnah* by Hector Bolitho, p. 206.

General of Pakistan, flew that day to Lahore to stay with Mudie, the Governor of the Western Punjab. At dawn on Monday, October 27, the Government of India flew a battalion of infantry into Kashmir in answer to the Maharaja's appeal. These troops took up positions in the central Vale of Kashmir to the west of the capital, Srinagar, to oppose the Muslim tribesmen who were reported to be some thirty-five miles from the city.

Pakistan, so far, had not been directly and openly involved; but a foolhardy or careless move by anybody, on either side, could bring the two Dominions into open—as distinct from hidden and unadmitted—conflict with one another. That move was almost made. There was one means of preventing it—the instantaneous removal, from all commands and all appointments on the staff, of all British officers in the service of both Dominions. The British Commander-in-Chief, Lockhart, on the instructions of India's Defence Committee, had ordered Indian troops to fly into Kashmir; this was a perfectly proper and legal step, since Kashmir had acceded to India. The British Commander-in-Chief in Pakistan, Messervy, was on leave; his Chief of Staff, Douglas Gracey,<sup>1</sup> was deputizing for him.

*Field-Marshal Auchinleck to Chiefs of Staff, London 28 October 1947*

Gracey reported by phone to me 01.00 hours night October 27–28 that he had received orders from Jinnah which if obeyed would entail issue 'Stand Down' order.<sup>2</sup>

Flew Lahore morning October 28 and met Gracey who said orders which he had *not* obeyed were to send troops into Kashmir to seize Baramula and Srinagar also Banihal Pass and to send troops into Mirpur district of Jammu.

Met Jinnah who is in Lahore and discussed situation at length explaining situation *vis-à-vis* British officers very clearly. Gracey also emphasized military weakness of Pakistan while I pointed out incalculable consequences of military violation of what now is territory of Indian Union in consequence of Kashmir's sudden accession.

Jinnah withdrew orders but is very angry and disturbed by what he considers to be sharp practice by India in securing Kashmir's accession and situation remains explosive and highly dangerous in my opinion as further successes by irregular tribal forces now in Kashmir or massacres of Muslims in Jammu or

<sup>1</sup> General Sir Douglas Gracey, subsequently (1948–51) C.-in-C. Pakistan Army.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Stand Down' order meant the withdrawal of all British officers.

## AUCHINLECK

Kashmir by State Forces or Indian Union troops which are quite possible might so inflame feelings on both sides as to force open conflict. Control by Government in such circumstances likely to be ineffective.

Jinnah agreed to my suggestion that he and his Prime Minister should meet Mountbatten, Nehru, Maharaja Kashmir and his Prime Minister at round table conference to try find way out of present dangerous situation. Have passed this on to Mountbatten who also agreed in principle. Matter is now in hands of two Governors-General.

Will inform you if situation deteriorates in respect of position of British officers.

On 1-2 July 1942, defeating Rommel in the first battle of El Alamein, Auchinleck turned the tide of the Second World War. On 28 October 1947, making the last major decision of his career as a soldier, Auchinleck prevented the outbreak of a war between India and Pakistan.

Mountbatten was eager to act upon the initiative put into his hands by Auchinleck. During the morning of October 28 he persuaded the Indian Defence Committee to accept the invitation to Lahore; but at the Cabinet meeting in the afternoon there was strong resistance to the whole idea, and comparisons were made with Neville Chamberlain's visit to Hitler at Godesberg in 1938. Vallabhbhai Patel, in particular, made his opposition clear to the Governor-General. Nehru fell suddenly ill, and Mountbatten went alone. There was no war, and no Munich either.

\* \* \*

The end of the road was very near. The moment of supreme crisis in Indo-Pakistan relations had passed: within less than a month the newspapers, both in India and in the United Kingdom, were beginning to talk about a welcome *détente* between the two countries. The credit for this agreeable outcome was given, as more than once in Auchinleck's career, to others. He went tranquilly on preparing to wind up his Headquarters and hand over to Arthur Smith.

On November 7 the Government of the United Kingdom informed the Governments of India and Pakistan that they had no option but to close down the Supreme Commander's Headquarters on 30 November 1947.

The following day the Governor-General of India wrote this letter to the Supreme Commander:

My dear Claude,

... No one could have done more for India over an entire life's career devoted to her Army and nobody contributed more to help find a peaceful and acceptable solution. I hope you will not let the fact that impartiality is no longer respected by many Indians make you feel that you have somehow failed—history will show very much the reverse.

I have felt all along that in spite of your many honours you have never had your due—when they first wished to give me a peerage in December 1946 I asked for it to be postponed—I also urged that you should be given one. The King told me that your name would be considered when your time was up as C.-in-C. in India. When therefore I wrote to the Prime Minister I knew he would immediately accept my recommendation and as I told you he immediately did.

Your name went in for the G.C.S.I. but when I am in London I can take it out again. I am glad you agree that your subordinate commanders whose names went in can remain in for you must realize that the list will be dated August 14 and will clearly have nothing to do with subsequent events.

I am also sorry but also understand your not wanting us to give you a large farewell dinner but I hope you will allow me to ask some of your real friends in to say good-bye to you at an informal lunch after the J.D.C. on November 26, or small dinner that evening.

Finally may I tell you again how deeply I appreciate your friendship, loyalty and help throughout this very difficult time. You are a very great man, Claude, and I'm proud to have worked with you.

Yours ever,

DICKIE.

\* \* \*

It was now public knowledge that Auchinleck was leaving India. By his own wish he went hardly more obtrusively than, as a young subaltern forty-four years ago, he had come thither.

*General Treffry Thompson<sup>1</sup> to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

11 November 1947

I am not very good at expressing my feelings verbally, so I am writing this just to say how much I have appreciated serving under you.

<sup>1</sup> Maj.-Gen. Sir Treffry Thompson, Director of Medical Services, G.H.Q. India and Supreme Commander's H.Q., 1946-7.

I have three good characteristic memories, and even a picture of the first in an album.

1. You standing in very wide shorts with your foot on a rock gazing up at one of the hill-top episodes in the Mohmand Bajaur show.

2. An interview when you first took over as C-in-C. at which you asked why I was only a Lieutenant-Colonel in the job of D.D.H. and P. [Deputy Director of Hygiene and Pathology]. In four days I was pushed up in rank.

3. When I was cogitating over the business of the British Red Cross job in your room the other day, apparently looking very grim and you told me not to scowl at you and then laughed.

It is no wonder fellows so fully appreciate serving under you.

*Field-Marshal the Earl Wavell to Field-Marshal Auchinleck*

20 November 1947

My dear Claude,

This is just a line of sympathy for you, and of good wishes for the future. I know how deeply you must be feeling the tragic events in India, and the disruption of the Indian Army and the apparent destruction of your life's work.

It is heart-breaking indeed, but you have the consolation that no man could possibly have done more, indeed none so much as you did; that all who served with you and under you realize this and regard you with admiration and affection; and that the Indian Army under your command reached in the late war its highest point of fame and reputation and efficiency.

It may never be so effective a force again or have the same spirit. But the work that you and all your officers did will live both in the past and future history of India.

With my grateful thanks again for all you did for me and with all sympathy for the present and good wishes for the future.

Yours ever,

ARCHIE.

*General L. G. Whistler<sup>1</sup> to Field-Marshal Auchinleck* 22 November 1947

On behalf of all ranks of the British troops in India and Pakistan I send you our great gratitude for all you have done for us. On leaving India we wish you Godspeed and good fortune.

<sup>1</sup> Maj.-Gen. (later Gen.) Sir Lashmer Whistler, Maj.-Gen. British Troops in India 1947-8.

On the following night there was a dinner party for twelve in the Supreme Commander's house. His Generals dined with their Field-Marshal for the last time. A small sheet of Auchinleck's office pad—headed 'C.-in-C. Note', with 'C.-in-C.' scratched out—recorded the names of those who were present. It went, with a number of photographs, drawings, private jokes and a mordant parody of A. E. Housman's *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*, into a big album, which these, his friends and brother officers, gave him. On the final page of this album there were two words, 'God Bless'. To each and every one of them he had said 'God Bless' again and again in affectionate farewell. Now his own words echoed back to him. His last official action was to inspect a Guard of Honour of the Royal Scots Fusiliers. He spent his last night in India as the guest of the Mountbattens. On the morning of December 1 he stepped into a big black car and drove away from Delhi to the airfield. Arthur Smith was there to bid him farewell. So many morning take-offs into the sunlight over the nine ruined cities of Delhi, over the spreading plain and the slow winding river; and this was the last. He shook hands with Arthur Smith and turned away to the aircraft. Arthur Smith stood at the salute. The aircraft took off at once and headed northwards away from India.

\* \* \*

*Prime Minister to Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, G.C.B.,  
G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E.*

*30 December 1947*

My Dear Field-Marshal,

I have been hoping to see you on your return to this country, but I understand that you have gone direct to Italy from India, and are proposing to stay there for some little time. This being so, I must convey to you in writing what I should have liked to express to you in person, namely, the sincere gratitude of the Government, and, I am sure, of informed opinion throughout the country, for the way in which you have accomplished the thankless task which we set you as Supreme Commander. All of us who have intimate knowledge of Indian affairs realize that, in the last twelve months, your influence has been of incalculable weight and value, not only on the military side, but even more in the wider political sphere, into which you have so often found yourself dragged.

You may feel that your job ended in little but frustration; but the fact that the Army held together as well as it did, that reconstitution went through so smoothly, and that both India

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and Pakistan now have disciplined Armed Forces at their command, is clear proof of the real and lasting success of the work you did.

This is only the latest of many services that you have rendered to the country, and you may rest assured that none of us will forget them.

Yours sincerely,

C. R. ATTLEE.

## APPENDIX ONE

### *Appreciation of the Situation in the Western Desert*

*El Alamein, 14.45 hours, 27 July 1942*

#### OBJECT:

1. The defence of Egypt by the defeat of the enemy forces in the Western Desert.

#### FACTORS:

2. *Comparison of Strength.* From a rough comparison on a brigade group basis, based on what we now know of the enemy's present strength and his reinforcement schedule, it seems that the enemy will hardly be able to secure a decisive superiority over us in the first half of August, provided we fight united, since the Germans would begin any offensive with an inferiority of about three infantry brigade groups and possibly 40 per cent superiority in armour. The enemy may also be inferior in artillery. It would seem that, though the Axis forces are strong enough for defensive action, they are hardly strong enough to attempt the conquest of the Delta except as a gamble and under very strong air cover. There remains for the Axis to use one German Air Landing Division, but this is taking over I.S. duties in Greece and Crete and seems unlikely to be an asset. It might, however, be used to redress the balance at a decisive moment. Throughout August the anticipated balance of strength hardly justifies a German offensive, unless we make a serious mistake and leave an opening. He may, however, be reinforced in the second part of August, though nothing is known to be scheduled. On the other hand the Axis may make great efforts to strengthen Panzer Armee in the shortest time.

3. *Land Forces—Numbers and Morale.* Broadly speaking, though all our forces have been through hard times, their morale is high. German morale is probably a little lower and Italian morale not more than 50 per cent. In view of the known inefficiency of the Italian forces, any offensive action taken by the Axis forces in August would have to be 80 per cent German.

4. *Material.* The Eighth Army has some 60 Grant tanks now and will receive another 60 Grant tanks early in August, but there will be no more coming until September. The deduction is that it is



necessary to husband our armour carefully in view of the fact that during August the enemy may build up to between 150 and 200 German tanks.

Eighth Army's deficiencies in transport are mounting. It is also necessary to husband our ammunition resources. The enemy has however similar deficiencies and his reinforcing division is notably deficient in anti-tank weapons and transport.

5. *Training.* None of the formations in Eighth Army is now sufficiently well trained for offensive operations. The Army badly needs either a reinforcement of well trained formations or a quiet period in which to train.

6. *Fighting value with reference to air forces.* At present we have such air superiority that, while our troops are relatively free from molestation, the enemy is continually attacked by night and day. Our land forces are considerably heartened by this, and a large measure of tactical freedom and security accrues from it. Unless the enemy is strongly reinforced and our air forces are correspondingly reduced, this superiority will assist our offensive or defensive and gravely impede the enemy. Our air superiority is a very considerable, if somewhat indefinable, asset.

7. *Vulnerable Points.* To us the two vulnerable points are Cairo and Alexandria. Occupation of the Cairo area by the enemy would eventually dry up the Sweet Water Canal besides securing an important area for air and land maintenance. Alexandria is useful as a naval base and port of ingress for supplies. The present position of Eighth Army at El Alamein denies direct access to either place by road and flanks any attempt to by-pass. The defences of Alexandria-Cairo-the Delta proper, east of the Nubariya canal and the Wadi Natrun area will be well forward by August 14 and should be complete, in so far as defences are ever complete, by the end of August. Bottle-necks exposed to air action are the Nile crossings at Cairo and northwards; these are being supplemented by two floating bridges south of Cairo and by improving the routes from these bridges eastwards. All arrangements for demolitions in the Delta are being made. The enemy has few really vulnerable points. There are bottle-necks at Sollum and about Matruh and Bagush, and his long L. of C. is vulnerable to attack by raids from the air or inland or from the sea. But otherwise the enemy is not physically vulnerable, except to direct assault. Morally his Italians are always vulnerable. The soft sand areas of the country east of El Alamein, notably the 'Barrel Track' axis, the Wadi Natrun, the sand area to its north, are all added difficulties for the

## APPENDIX I

enemy's movement, particularly as they cannot be widely known to him.

8. *Ground.* The armies are now in close contact over a forty-mile front between the sea and the Qattara Depression. Most of the area is open and can be largely controlled by artillery fire.

The front divides into three main sectors:

A. From Tel Eisa to exclusive the Ruweisat Ridge. This area is held by two divisions (five infantry brigade groups). The Tel Eisa salient has considerable offensive value, but is not essential to its defence, unless the Miteiriya Ridge is also held by us. Most of the area is difficult for wheeled movement. It is on our side strongly defended by the fortified locality of El Alamein and the mined positions to the south. This area is well supported by strong prepared localities to a depth of twenty-five miles. The enemy lies in open flat country. His positions lack any well defined features and are covered by extensive mine-fields. At El Daba he has dumps.

B. From inclusive the El Mreir depression to inclusive the Bab el Qattara depression. This area is held by two divisions (four brigade groups) supported by the equivalent of one armoured brigade. We hold the high ground in this area at Pt 63 on the Ruweisat Ridge. This position is naturally strong and has been fortified to considerable depth. The enemy holds strongly a series of depressions which give good cover. His front has been well mined and has some wire.

In sectors A and B both the enemy and ourselves have attacked in turn without success.

C. From exclusive the fortified locality in the Bab el Qattara depression to inclusive the complete obstacle of the great Qattara Depression. The enemy is well posted on strong ground at Kelat and Taqa in positions which he has prepared for defence. The object of these positions is to protect his southern flank from being turned by our mobile troops. We have no defences in depth opposite this sector, which is lightly covered by mobile troops.

9. *Time and Space.* Had the enemy the available resources, Italy and Germany are far nearer to El Alamein than is anywhere in the United Nations. The enemy should therefore be able to reinforce quicker than we. On the other hand, apart from distant Benghazi, he has only two serviceable sea ports, Tobruk and, much less useful, Matruh. He may also make use of the railway to a limited extent. He is faced with long road hauls and a sea passage vulnerable to air and submarine attack. This affects the building up of reserves for an

offensive. We are nearer our bases. Our limitation is the rate that men and material can reach Egypt from overseas. His limitation is the rate at which it can reach his troops when it arrives. This indicates the necessity of blocking Tobruk and Matruh and attacking his road and rail transport and his shipping.

10. *Political Factors.* Hardly enter into this appreciation, except inasmuch as pressure may be put on the Axis Command to press on to Egypt before their Army is ready or has sufficient margin of force. Our danger lies in a politically unstable Egypt in our rear. So far this danger has not developed.

11. *The Russian Front.* The operations of Eighth Army are linked to the fate of Russia. Should the Axis penetrate the Caucasus, Eighth Army might be reduced to the lowest margin to provide reinforcements for the new front. Moreover, a considerable Axis success in Russia would release air and land forces and equipment for the reinforcement of the Western Desert.

12. *Maintenance.* The enemy is experiencing great difficulty in maintaining his present forces at El Alamein. This condition may improve gradually when more heavy transport vehicles come from Italy. It is not likely to improve so much that he can maintain an appreciably larger force. . . . Our maintenance presents no real difficulties, except that our stocks of 25-pounder shells are not inexhaustible, and we could certainly maintain forces of double the present size of Eighth Army in this area if they existed.

#### COURSES OPEN TO OURSELVES AND THE ENEMY:

##### 13. *Ourselves.*

A. To continue to attack the enemy in the hope that he will crack before his Army is reinforced by fresh troops. The pros and cons of attacking are:

In the northern and central sectors we have made two attempts to break the enemy's front without success. Failure has been due to lack of trained troops, rigidity of organization and limited resources in armour and infantry and it seems that the enemy's positions are now too strongly held to be attacked with success with the resources available.

We have also attacked in the southern sector, but weakly and largely as a diversion. Our attack failed, but the enemy though strongly posted is not numerous here, and this front might go if suddenly attacked. If it did go, it offers access for our mobile troops to the enemy's flanks and rear.

The problems of attack on this front are, firstly, how to find the

supporting fire without unduly weakening the northern and central sectors. Secondly, how to find the troops. The only formation which might be used is the weak N.Z. Division supported by its own artillery, the artillery of the 7th Armoured Division and some of 5th Indian Division's artillery. This would have to be deployed in secret and developed as a complete surprise. Failure would probably make the N.Z. Division unfit for further operations for a considerable time. Having in mind the weakness in numbers and training of this division the chances of success can only be rated as 60-40. Failure would seriously deplete our present resources. On the whole this attack hardly seems advisable at present.

B. To adopt the tactical defensive until we are strong enough to attack, which, unless the enemy's position deteriorates, will not be till mid-September at the earliest. The obvious objection is that we give the initiative to the enemy if he is able to use it. It is very doubtful if he will be able to take the initiative till late in August with any hope of success. In fact if he attacks before, provided we have a reserve in hand including up to 100 Grant tanks, we have a good chance of defeating him seriously in the area El Alamein-Hammam. Moreover, the critical period for the preparation and manning of the Delta and Cairo defences is now over. There is little danger of the enemy getting any value out of by-passing the Eighth Army on its present ground. There may be a critical period late in August before the new divisions (two of armour, two of infantry) are ready, but this might be tided over by preparing their artillery battle groups in advance of the rest of the divisions and so reinforcing Eighth Army. (This project requires further examination.) This defensive could also be mitigated by enterprises against Siwa and the southern section of his front and by seaborne attacks.

14. *Courses open to the enemy.* The enemy must resume the offensive without delay, but he is unlikely to be able to do so before mid-August and even then no real margin of superiority, except in A.F.V.s is apparent. He will certainly try to attack before the end of August and as Eighth Army defences gain in strength and depth he will be more than ever tempted to avoid them and seek success in manoeuvre. This may well land him into serious difficulties in the soft desert.

Alternatively, he may have to adopt the strategical defensive because our forces are too strong and too well placed for attack. If he does, he may either stand his ground or withdraw to an intermediate position covering Matruh, which will eventually be to our

advantage for he will still be in striking distance when we are again fit to attack. If he goes back to the Egyptian frontier, it is questionable whether he should not be left undisturbed.

15. *Course recommended.* Seeing that we are hardly fit at present to do any more attacks, our best course is the defensive combined with offensive gestures from time to time, including raiding. The cover plan should be such as would induce the enemy to strike prematurely, i.e., mid-August, say, between August 10 and 20. Meanwhile the Army front should be strengthened, and so held that at least one formation could come into reserve and train. At the same time the command of Eighth Army should be put on a permanent footing.

16. *Plan recommended.*

*Intention.* Eighth Army will defeat any attempt of the enemy to pass through or round it.

17. *Method.*

(a) *Forward troops.*

30 Corps: 1 South African Division, 9 Australian Division.

13 Corps: 1 New Zealand Division, 7 Armoured Division.

(b) *Reserve.*

5 Indian Division (4 Indian Division eventually): 1 Armoured Division.

(c) *General line of F.D.L.s.* El Alamein defences—Pt 63 (eastern) on Ruweisat Ridge—vicinity of Alam Nayal. South of Alam Nayal the flank will be covered by 7 Armoured Division.

(d) *General line of reserve positions.* For forward bodies, the most western line of the new rearward position.

Should it be desired to avoid the full effect of an enemy attack in great strength the above F.D.L.s can become the outpost line and the main front can be withdrawn accordingly.

(e) *Matruh.* Should be blocked by the Navy without delay.

#### TACTICAL TECHNIQUE AND FUTURE ORGANIZATION:

18. In the light of the course recommended it will be necessary to adjust our tactical technique. This should be based on three facts:

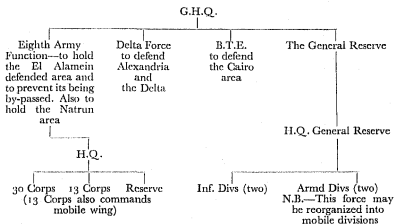
A. We have to be prepared to fight a modern defensive battle in the area El Alamein—Hammam. The troops detailed for this must be trained and exercised so as to get the maximum value from the ground and the prepared positions.

B. Eighth Army may have to meet an enemy's sortie developing into manœuvre by the southern flank from his firm front on the general line Bab el Qattara—Taqa Plateau. We must there-

fore organize and train a strong mobile wing, based on 7th Armoured Division, comprising a divisional artillery, 7th Motor Brigade, 4th Light Armoured Brigade, and possibly extra Crusader units. This mobile wing must be well trained in harassing defensive technique.

C. Eventually we will have to renew the offensive and this will probably mean a break-through the enemy positions about El Alamein. The newly arrived infantry divisions and the armoured divisions must be trained for this and for pursuit.

19. From the point of view of G.H.Q., the organization of our available force in August and September might take the following form:



20. *Summary.* The enemy now holds in sufficient strength for his purpose a front from which he cannot be dislodged by manoeuvre or any attack Eighth Army can at present deliver. We are strongly posted for a defensive battle. The enemy is attempting to build up his strength and renew his attack on Egypt. Eighth Army requires re-equipment and training before it will be fit for offensive operations. During August it is unlikely that either ourselves or the enemy will be strongly reinforced on land; a successful offensive by either side is therefore unlikely. Provided the land and air situation does not change, Eighth Army can be reinforced about mid-September by two armoured divisions and two infantry divisions. This may give us a superiority sufficient to justify a direct attack on what may be by then a strongly organized front.

Alternatively, we may develop a threat to the enemy's rear via

## AUCHINLECK

Siwa. The immediate need is to reorganize present forces with Eighth Army and to re-arrange the front so as to provide an army reserve. The longer term policy is to train the newly arrived divisions for the counter-offensive which it is hoped might begin in the latter part of September.

## APPENDIX TWO

*Memorandum by the Commander-in-Chief in India on the first 'I.N.A.' trial, circulated in February 1946.*

I have now been able to study a large number of reports from higher and unit commanders and other sources on the effect of the action taken in respect of the first 'I.N.A.' trial on the Indian Army as a whole.

It is most important that we should study and analyse carefully these effects, as they may influence very greatly our ability to maintain the solidarity and reliability of the Indian Army in the difficult times which undoubtedly lie ahead of us. It is for this reason that I am writing this letter to you. I have considered the desirability of making a personal public statement in explanation of my action in commuting the sentences of transportation passed by the Court on the first three accused, but I have decided that this would not be in the best interests of discipline or the maintenance of my influence and authority as Commander-in-Chief.

I feel, however, that we should do all we can to remove the feelings of doubt, resentment and even disgust which appear to exist in the minds of quite a number of British officers, who have not the knowledge or the imagination to be able to view the situation as a whole, or to understand the present state of feeling in India.

2. As I see it, the commutation of the sentences of transportation on Shah Nawaz, Dhillon and Saghal has had the following effects in India:

(a) *On the general public, moderate as well as extremist, Muslim as well as Hindu:*

Pleasure and intense relief born of the conviction that confirmation of the sentences would have resulted in violent internal conflict.

This feeling does not, in my opinion, spring universally from the idea that the convicted officers were trying to rid India of the British and, therefore, to be applauded, whatever crimes they might commit, but from a generally genuine feeling that they were patriots and nationalists and that, therefore, even if they were misled they should be treated with clemency, as true sons of India. In this connexion, it should be remembered, I think, that every Indian worthy of the name is today a 'Nationalist', though this does not mean that he is necessarily 'anti-British'. All the same, where India and



her independence are concerned, there are no 'pro-British' Indians.

Every Indian commissioned officer is a Nationalist and rightly so, provided he hopes to attain independence for India by constitutional means.

(b) *On the Indian officers of the Indian Army:*

Except for a few recovered prisoners of war who have suffered much at the hands of their fellow countrymen who joined the so-called 'I.N.A.', the vast majority, almost without exception, however much they may like and respect the British, are glad and relieved because of the result of the trial. Most of them admit the gravity of the offence and do not condone it, but practically all are sure that any attempt to enforce the sentence would have led to chaos in the country at large and probably to mutiny and dissension in the Army culminating in its dissolution, probably on communal lines.

The more senior and intelligent undoubtedly realize the implications of our having established in principle the seriousness of the crime of forsaking one's allegiance and the wisdom of meeting it with a heavy punishment such as 'Cashiering' which carries with it the stigma of disgrace.

They realize that if their future is to be at all secure, discipline and loyalty must be maintained, but they, too, are Nationalists, and their feelings are much the same as those of the public at large.

(c) *On the V.C.O.s and rank and file of the Indian Army:*

In very many units apparently little interest was displayed in the 'I.N.A.' trials, especially in the more illiterate and educationally backward arms of the Service, such as the infantry and artillery.

In the technical units and amongst clerks, etc., however, interest was keen and widespread.

Some of the V.C.O.s and rank and file had suffered like their officers at the hands of their former comrades who joined the 'I.N.A.' and perhaps feel correspondingly bitter and disgusted at the leniency shown. This is inevitable and can not be helped, regrettable though it may be. This section of opinion is relatively small.

The great majority are, I think, pleased that leniency has been shown for a variety of reasons.

Many of them have relations and friends from the same villages amongst the 'I.N.A.'. Many think that, as the war is over, bygones should be bygones and a fresh start made.

Others are genuinely nationalistic in outlook and have been affected by agitation and propaganda. The great majority feel, I think, that the whole episode is unpleasant and discreditable to them as a class and to the Army as a whole, and would wish it forgotten and decently buried as soon as possible.

Under all this, there is, I think, an uneasy feeling as to the future and doubt as to whether their interests will be as well watched in the days to come as they have been in the past.

(d) *On the British officers of the Indian Army:*

As I have already said, the effect on many British officers has been bad, and has led to public criticism which has not been in accordance with the traditional loyalty I am entitled to expect. To these officers, perhaps not always very perceptive or imaginative, an officer is an officer, whether he be Indian or British, and they make no allowance for birth or political aspirations or upbringing, nor do they begin to realize the great political stresses and strains now affecting this country. They are unable to differentiate between the British and Indian points of view.

Moreover, they forget, if they ever knew, the great bitterness bred in the minds of many Indian officers in the early days of 'Indianization' by the discrimination, often very real, exercised against them, and the discourteous, contemptuous treatment meted out to them by many British officers who should have known better.

These facts constitute the background against which the decisions should be judged, always keeping before one the object, which is to preserve by all possible means in our power the solidarity of the Indian Army, and of the R.I.N. and the R.I.A.F. as well.

I have not specifically mentioned the two younger services, but everything I have said in this letter applies to them just as much as to the Army, and perhaps more so, as the ratings or other ranks of these Services are better educated and perhaps more politically minded than those of the Army.

3. I would like you also to consider and to impress on others, especially those British officers who have been upset by the result of the first 'I.N.A.' trial, the effect of the capitulation of Singapore on the Indian troops involved in it, from amongst whom the 'I.N.A.' was subsequently formed.

Those who have served for many years with Indian troops, as I have done, have always recognized that the loyalty of our men was really to the officers of the regiment or unit, and that although there may have been some abstract sentiments of loyalty and patriotism to the Government and to the King, the men's allegiance for all practical purposes was focused on the regiment, and particularly on the regimental officers, on whom they depended for their welfare, advancement and future prospects.

In these officers their faith and trust were almost childlike, as events have proved time and time again. It is true to say that in almost every case of serious discontent or indiscipline, and there

have been remarkably few of them, which has occurred in the past fifty years, the cause could be traced to indifferent officers and bad man-management.

4. The terrible tragedy of Singapore following on the fall of Hong Kong must have seemed to the great majority of the V.C.O.s and rank and file to be the end of all things, and certainly of the British 'Raj' to whom the Army had been used for so many years of war and peace to look as its universal provider and protector, acting through their own regimental officers.

Their British officers were at once taken from them and they were at once assailed by traitors who had been kept in readiness by the Japanese to seduce them from their allegiance. Their Indian officers in many instances proved false to their trust and used their influence to suborn their own men, skilfully aided and encouraged by the Japanese.

The strain and pressure to which these men, the majority of whom were simple peasant farmers with no cultural or educational background, were subjected is very difficult for any British officer, however experienced, to visualize. Nevertheless it is quite impossible for any British officer to judge them fairly unless he does try to visualize it and realize what these men must have thought and felt.

It is quite wrong to adopt the attitude that because these men had taken service in a British-controlled Indian Army, therefore their loyalties must be the same as those of British soldiers. As I have tried to explain, they had no real loyalty or patriotism towards Britain as Britain, not as we understand loyalty.

5. So much for the rank and file. The officers who went over present a much more difficult problem. Owing to their presumably superior education, knowledge of the world and experience generally, it is not possible to apply the same reasoning to them, except possibly to the very junior, and to those who had been promoted from the ranks, whose background was more limited and whose knowledge was less.

There is no excuse for the regular officers who went over, beyond the fact that the early stages of 'Indianization' from its inception to the beginning of the late war were badly mismanaged by the British Government of India, and this prepared the ground for disloyalty when the opportunity came.

There is little doubt that 'Indianization' was at its inception looked on as a political expedient which was bound to fail militarily. There is no doubt also that many senior British officers believed and even hoped that it would fail.

The policy of segregation of Indian officers into separate units, the

differential treatment in respect of pay and terms of service as compared with the British officer, and the prejudice and lack of manners of some—by no means all—British officers and their wives, all went to produce a very deep and bitter feeling of racial discrimination in the minds of the most intelligent and progressive of the Indian officers, who were naturally Nationalists, keen to see India standing on her own legs and not to be ruled from Whitehall for ever.

It is no use shutting one's eyes to the fact that any Indian officer worth his salt is a Nationalist, though this does not mean, as I have said before, that he is necessarily anti-British. If he is anti-British this is as often as not due to his faulty handling and treatment by his British officer comrades.

It is essential for the preservation of future unity that this fact should be fully understood by all British officers.

No Indian officer must be regarded as suspect and disloyal merely because he is what is called a 'Nationalist', or in other words—a good Indian!

6. This aspect of the business, though it cannot excuse the action of these officers in going over to the enemy, must be considered, as it does provide the background against which we must view the present and the future.

We have very full evidence of the mental processes which these officers went through and many of them hesitated for a long time before they finally succumbed to circumstances and the persuasion of the Japanese and their extremist fellow-countrymen. Many of them having joined the first so-called 'I.N.A.' under Mohan Singh, refused to join the second under Bose and spent the next three years as prisoners of war in the islands of the Pacific. This does not excuse their original lapse but does show that they were subjected to conflicting stresses and strains mentally.

7. There remains the matter of the decision to commute the sentences of the first three officers (Saghal, Dhillon and Shah Nawaz) from 'Transportation' to 'Cashingier'. If, as we have admitted, they were guilty of the worst crime a soldier can commit, then it may well be asked—"Why be lenient with them?"

In taking the decision to show clemency, the whole circumstances, past, present and future, had to be considered, and were so considered most carefully and over a long period.

The overriding object is to maintain the stability, reliability and efficiency of the Indian Army so that it may remain in the future a trustworthy weapon for use in the defence of India and, we hope, of the Commonwealth as a whole.

It was essential to establish the principle that falseness to his

allegiance is a crime which cannot be countenanced in any officer under whatever Government he may be serving. By confirming the finding of the Court and the sentence of 'Cashiering' which carries with it the highest degree of disgrace to an officer, we have done this. To have added imprisonment to this sentence would not in any way have helped to emphasize the principle we were concerned to preserve.

On the other hand, having considered all the evidence and appreciated to the best of my ability the general trend of Indian public opinion and of the feeling in the Indian Army, I have no doubt at all that to have confirmed the sentence of imprisonment solely on the charge of 'waging war against the King' would have had disastrous results, in that it would have probably precipitated a violent outbreak throughout the country, and have created active and widespread disaffection in the Army, especially amongst the Indian officers and the more highly educated rank and file. To have taken this risk would have been seriously to jeopardize our object.

Always keeping before one the difference in outlook between British and Indian, which I have tried to explain in this letter, I decided, therefore, that, in the interests of the future of both India and Britain and because of the unprecedented circumstances of the case, the only proper course to pursue was to confirm the finding and so establish the principle, but to show clemency in respect of the sentence. Some bewilderment has been caused, I believe, by the fact that Shah Nawaz, who was found guilty of 'abetment of murder' as well as of 'waging war', received the same treatment as the other two accused who were found guilty of 'waging war' only. Shah Nawaz's offence, which was committed by him as an officer of the 'I.N.A.' in the alleged execution of his duty, in that he ordered a sentence authorized by a higher 'I.N.A.' authority to be carried out, did, in the circumstances, flow from his basic offence of 'waging war' as a member of the 'I.N.A.'. The punishment for this—the principal offence—was 'Cashiering' in the case of all three officers. Shah Nawaz did not himself commit any brutal or violent act against any person, but passed on the orders of a superior authority which he claims to have believed to have been properly constituted.

It is necessary also to remember that some 20,000 officers and men joined the so-called 'I.N.A.'. and that, even if it were desirable, it would have been a physical impossibility to bring all these men to trial within anything approaching a reasonable period of time.

8. The situation now is that the principle that the forsaking of his allegiance by a soldier is a crime in any circumstances has been established, and that no further trials on this account alone will be

held. Those against whom there is adequate evidence of murder and brutality will be tried and punished in the ordinary way.

In the second, third and fourth trials the charge of 'waging war' has been included in addition to the other charges because these trials were commenced before the finding of the Court in the first trial was known. If the accused in these three trials are found guilty on this charge, the Court will pass the sentence of 'Transportation for Life' which is the minimum admissible under the Army Act for the offence of 'waging war'.

When it comes to confirmation of the sentence, however, the facts in respect of the other charges of brutality will be the guiding factor.

In any subsequent trials, the charge of 'waging war' will be omitted as our object is now to punish those who may have been guilty of brutal acts towards their former comrades.

9. As to the great mass of rank and file of the so-called 'I.N.A.', these are now being examined by Courts of Enquiry as rapidly as possible with a view to finding out whether they are to be classified as 'White', 'Grey' or 'Black'. I realize very well, and so does everyone else at G.H.Q. and in the War Department, the urgent need for disposing of these men at the earliest possible moment, so that the whole affair may have a reasonable chance of being forgotten, which is I am sure the ardent desire of the Army as a whole. At the same time, it is quite certain from the evidence at our disposal that if this enquiry is not carried out with reasonable thoroughness, great injustice may be done to innocent men. The temptation, therefore, to discharge or dismiss all and sundry summarily and without more ado must be resisted.

10. There is one other criticism which is often made. It is said that we ought to have dealt with the accused summarily in forward areas; that if the men were to be brought to India we should have avoided publicity, and, in particular, trial in the Red Fort; and that we ought to have put out counter-publicity from the start. The answer to the first point is that we had to deal with 45,000 men, in one instance a whole 'I.N.A.' division surrendering without firing a shot. It was obviously impracticable for forward areas to deal with men on this scale summarily, and it was the obvious course to send them back to India where the records and Intelligence organization existed for interrogation. As to publicity, I am sure it was right to decide not to hold trials in secret because it would have been thought that the men were not getting a fair trial. Once it was decided that the trials could not be held in secret, it would have been wrong to tuck them away somewhere where defence counsel, relations, etc.,

could not conveniently attend; and the Red Fort was the most convenient place from nearly every point of view. We avoided counter-publicity because it was practically certain that a big publicity drive would be represented as prejudicing the accused in their trial; but in any event it is not possible for us to force papers to publish anything which they regard as propaganda and with which they do not agree. We have no control over them in this respect.

11. This letter has become very lengthy, but I make no apology for this as I consider it essential that the full facts of this sad business should be put before you, so that you in your turn can put them before the officers serving under you, as and when it appears necessary to you.

You should not, in explaining the matter to your officers, quote me as Commander-in-Chief but should use the material I have tried to give you in this letter in any way you think suitable to the purpose as if it came from yourself.

12. Finally let me again state the object: it is to maintain the reliability, stability and efficiency of the Indian Army for the future, whatever Government may be set up in India.

This can be done only if the British and Indian officers of that Army trust and respect each other and continue to work wholeheartedly together for the common cause as they have done in war.

It is your task to do your utmost to bring this about and I am sure you will: you have excellent material on which to work.

13. If you are still in doubt on any point or have any suggestions to make in furtherance of our common object, I will be glad if you will let me or the Adjutant-General know.

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